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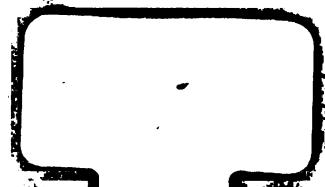
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1. The first step in the process of developing a new product is to identify the market needs and opportunities. This involves conducting market research, analyzing consumer behavior, and identifying trends and market segments. The goal is to understand the needs and wants of the target market and to identify opportunities for differentiation and value creation.

2. Once the market needs and opportunities are identified, the next step is to define the product concept. This involves developing a clear understanding of the product's features, benefits, and positioning. The product concept should be based on a deep understanding of the target market and should aim to address specific needs and wants.

3. The third step is to develop a detailed product plan. This plan should include a detailed description of the product, its features, and benefits, as well as a marketing plan, a financial plan, and a production plan. The product plan should be based on a thorough analysis of the market and should aim to create a competitive advantage.

4. The fourth step is to develop a prototype of the product. This involves creating a physical or digital representation of the product, based on the product concept and the product plan. The prototype should be tested and refined to ensure that it meets the needs and wants of the target market.

5. The fifth step is to launch the product. This involves launching the product in the market, through various channels and marketing strategies. The goal is to create awareness, generate interest, and drive sales. The launch should be carefully planned and executed to ensure success.

6. The sixth step is to monitor and evaluate the product's performance. This involves tracking sales, market share, and customer feedback, as well as monitoring the competition. The goal is to identify areas for improvement and to make necessary adjustments to the product and its marketing strategy.

7. The seventh step is to refine and improve the product. This involves making changes to the product's features, benefits, and positioning, based on feedback and performance data. The goal is to create a product that is better suited to the needs and wants of the target market.

8. The eighth step is to repeat the process. This involves identifying new market needs and opportunities, developing new product concepts, and launching new products. The goal is to continuously innovate and create value for the target market.

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N.C.W.

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HANDASYDE, *pseud.*

AUTHOR OF "FOUR GARDENS"

E. H. Buchanan

Love rules the court, the camp, the grove,
And men below, and saints above ;
For love is heaven, and heaven is love.

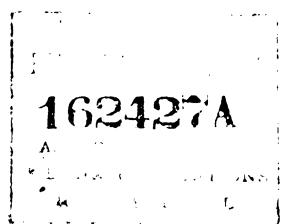
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THE EDDY EATONS' WEEK-END

FRIDAY NIGHT

Look down, dear eyes, look down,
Lest you betray her gladness.
Dear brows, do nought but frown,
Lest men miscall my madness.

Come not, dear hands, so near,
Lest all besides comes nearer,
Dear heart, hold me less dear,
Lest time hold nothing dearer.

W. E. HENLEY.

"Let it wait ; that's what the coachman is paid for," he had replied.

Wellington Cumberland Guest, or "Welcome" Guest, as his more intimate friends preferred to call him, stood on the middle of the platform winding up his watch, a duty he was too apt to forget. "Take care of the present moment, and the past must take care of itself," he murmured to himself, as he set it by the station clock. His past had need to perhaps, but Wellington Guest relied always on the promise of the morrow, and never let anything dim the gay careless expression in his pleasant blue eyes. He was so handsome and so accommodating, no one could help being glad to see him, and was quite as devoted to his world as it was to him, while his amazing spirits under every species of adversity left the ordinary grumbler dumb.

"I never wind up my watch," said the Duchess of Sunsutton, joining him. "I hate things you have to go on doing day after day, they make me so tired."

"There are some things I never get tired of," he answered. "Getting letters with cheques inside them, and speaking to duchesses."

Angela Sunsutton rubbed her shapely chin against the fur collar on her big coat, and smiled graciously to show she appreciated the point of his remark ; she was not bashful, and always acknowledged courtesies.

Wellington chatted on : "The brim of your hat's too big, and it's getting so dark, I can only see the outline of your face—hard lines you know, when I should so much like to see more."

"I hope you don't mean the lines on my face are

getting hard? I always thought my face was so soft."

"So it is—I mean I should like to make sure it is. What am I saying? I mean, I'm sure it is!"

"Gustavus has told me so," Angela answered, in dignified reproof; while Wellington endeavoured to look sober, and began inquiring politely after the Duke of Sunsutton's health.

But he still kept his eyes fixed on her face, and Angela, who enjoyed admiration, gave a considerate little push to the drooping brim of her hat. There were many people who thought her face quite the prettiest in England; she thought so herself, and was never tired of recognizing her own portrait in the picture magazines.

"Come," said Wellington, "I want to show you the most beautiful woman I know."

"Is it a looking-glass?" she asked sweetly, being used to remarks in the same happy vein.

"It's *Country Life*—did you know? You should always be lit by electric light," he answered, as he led her to the bookstall, where the obsequious man in charge had already opened the magazine at the full-page frontispiece.

While they lingered, Blanche Heythrop wandered off by herself to the end of the platform where the gun-cases were scattered about.

She looked at the initials on one or two, but apparently drew them blank; they all seemed to belong to her husband and Major Royle. At which moment the major himself came up to ask if he could do anything for her, and as he did so he knocked against a suit-case.

"Mortimer Keppel!" he exclaimed. "Didn't know he was back in England."

"Oh yes, sir, he's coming down by the late train," Keppel's servant answered, as he bore off his master's share of the luggage.

Mrs. Heythrop had evidently also found what she had gone to seek.

"Didn't you know he was back?" she remarked, as she and Major Royle moved away.

It seemed a dozen years, instead of one, since she had seen Mortimer Keppel, and her heart was full of another autumn evening, little more than a twelvemonth ago, when she and Mortimer had walked up and down together in the gloom of an empty shed in the docks at Southampton. There had been just the same glow in the sky, and she had watched the reflection dancing on the waves of Southampton Water; how sorrowful she had been, and how despairing and sad—to-night she was so glad, her feet scarcely touched the earth.

"I may never come back," Mortimer had said, tentatively, as he stopped for a moment and looked down at her pale face. "Won't you kiss me, Blanche?" he asked simply. Mortimer Keppel never beat about the bush.

"It doesn't make much difference what I do," she had answered, with a little sob; those Saturday afternoons at Southampton Docks during the Boer War unnerved many sensible women.

"I may never come back, what will it all matter then? You would only be sorry you had treated me so ill," he pleaded again.

"Where is Miles?" Blanche asked. It was a childish remark, but she was overwrought and all primitive woman that day. Musing for a moment longer on the chance of every bullet finding its billet, she held Keppel at arm's length. "You may never come back," she echoed, using his own argument in a voice even chance acquaintances found strangely charming and sweet. Then she relaxed her hold, and Mortimer Keppel stooped down.

"What did you say? How did you get on?" Miles had asked afterwards, when the great liner, with her grey hull and red funnels, slipped out to sea, and they turned away together. "Did you kiss him?" he asked; Miles always wanted to know what Blanche had been doing.

"He may never come back, what else could any one do?" she answered, and it needed all her strength of will to speak in her usual tone.

But Miles never noticed the stiffening of her upper lip, or the painful catch in her breath. Mightily amused at her style of reasoning, he had looked at her and laughed.

"You are certainly not overburdened with sentiment, Blanche!" he had said, thinking to himself how well he understood his wife.

That memorable little scene in the shed by Southampton Water had haunted Blanche ever since. It was the first time she had ever kissed Mortimer Keppel; to-night she was oddly stirred, and she blushed for her own vagrant fancy as she wondered if she would ever kiss him again. She could think of nothing but

Mortimer, and scarcely started when Angela Sun Sutton touched her arm, and asked her anxiously if Mr. Keppel was coming down?

"I believe so," Blanche said gently, for she knew the duchess was also thinking of Southampton Docks and the heaving sea that had so quickly separated the liner from the shore.

Angela had been there to say good-bye to Charlie. With the face of a god, and the jolly simplicity of a schoolboy, Charlie was admittedly the handsomest youth in the British Army. Motherless and fatherless, the kind-hearted duchess had always been his best friend, and up to the last moment she had busied herself with his comforts, thoughtfully supplying him with condensed chocolate, quinine powders, a leather Prayer-book, and the most expensive brand of cigarettes on the market. They had loved each other dearly, and she had tried to think of everything he could possibly want. And Charlie never came back, the dear familiar Charlie who had shared with her so much harmless fun, and returned her sympathy and loving-kindness in such a whole-hearted way; it was too fond a friendship for such a cruel blow, and the gay-spirited duchess had accepted it in a puzzled state of sore distress. Mortimer Keppel had been with him when he died, it was he who sent her the sudden news; but she had not seen him since his return, and was full of sorrowful eagerness to hear all those pathetic details he alone could tell.

"He knew Charlie," she told Blanche softly, and the shadow of death brooded for a moment over her lovely face.

"They've sent a brougham and an open bus, how are you going to drive?" asked Major Royle.

Erratic in even her saddest moods, Angela forgot Charlie, and remembered only her golden locks, and the standard of perfection she felt herself bound to maintain.

"It's as damp as damp; I think we three can all get into the brougham," she said a trifle fretfully, as she looked from Lady Mabel's smooth, somewhat severe locks to the natural waves of Blanche's brown hair.

"Won't you come with me, Mrs. Heythrop?" begged Major Royle. "I sent on my car, and it's waiting for me outside, if you would care to come."

Blanche Heythrop lived much of her life in the open air, and mostly left her looks to take care of themselves; she agreed at once, glad enough to be a little longer out of doors. The evening was delightfully soft, and her boundless happiness would have seemed shut away in the confinement of a brougham.

The duchess and Lady Mabel, marvelling somewhat at her temerity, drove off then.

"I should be afraid of all the curl coming out of my hair," said Angela.

"There never was any in mine—none of our family know how to do their hair," Lady Mabel answered resignedly.

She was always resigned, if a person of so little individuality could be said to have any characteristics at all. Yet she went everywhere, and every one asked her about; it had become a sort of habit, and in a brilliant assembly her negative virtues were sometimes quite a relief. During her father's life they had always

visited together, his popularity had been a byword, and anything that was his must be acceptable for that reason alone. Lady Mabel still continued to accept the invitations that now came only for her, to do so was almost mechanical; but whether she enjoyed the visits, or regretted too late that her identity had been swamped, no one ever knew. She never spoke about herself—it was not done in her family.

"Where is Miles?" asked Major Royle, as he turned his car sharply into the narrow country road.

"Attending a meeting in the City. He is coming down by the later train."

"Lucky fellow Miles! I wish I knew how to make money! I always envy business men, and he's just the type who'll develop into a millionaire before he's done."

"I hope so, I'm sure! At present we're no richer than our neighbours," Mrs. Heythrop answered, as she turned her head to admire the pink evening sky.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Blanche, for the glory of an autumn sunset was not the sort of thing to enter into Major Royle's philosophy.

She had learnt long ago that Mortimer Keppel was the only man who ever understood anything; but it did not upset her equanimity, and only made her all the more tolerant with Miles, for circumstances are oftentimes stronger than individuals, and Blanche was well aware of the limitations of life.

Castle Loftus was a stately abode that yet somehow suggested a fairy story. It was built of gleaming white

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aside the blind to see which way the window faced. It looked towards the front drive, so that she would be sure to hear Mortimer arrive, and she heaved a short sigh of satisfaction. But she did not draw the blind aside again when the brougham actually drove up, and she heard all the clatter of an arrival at the entrance down below—there was no more uncertainty now or anything to fear. She sang to herself, however, from pure lightheartedness, and wished her hair were always as easy to arrange as it was that night. Then the carriage drove away again, slowly towards the stables, and presently her husband came to her room.

“Did you know Mortimer Keppel was here?” he asked. “We travelled down together. He looks as fit as a fiddle, but he’s leaner than ever; only wish I knew his secret!”

Blanche laughed. “Oh, you’re all right,” she said consolingly, for Miles’s figure was a point of some delicacy.

He drew himself up and looked in the glass. “Glad you think so, I’m sure. I told you I had lost a pound, didn’t I? You’re looking very well yourself, Blanche; I like the way you’ve done your hair.”

Blanche shook her head. “It’s the same as usual,” she said.

Mental excitement, as likewise physical depression, always affected her hair; but she could scarcely explain it all to Miles, or tell him just why it was so crisp and curly that night.

“Well, I went to see my dear father,” Miles continued briskly, “and found him very bad,—very bad indeed, a good bit worse than I expected.”

"Poor old man, I hope he doesn't suffer?" she asked kindly.

There had seemed so little sorrow in Miles's rather exultant voice; and Blanche would have been sorry for a beetle to suffer that night.

"Suffer, did you say? Let us hope not—most probably not; but, 'pon my soul, I really forgot to ask."

All the while Miles talked he continued to perambulate the room. He disliked keeping still, and if he paused it was only to pick up and handle everything on the dressing-table in a restless sort of manner calculated to provoke most women dressing in rather a hurry for dinner, but Blanche was used to it.

"I saw the doctor," continued Miles; "they were having a consultation, and I arrived just in time. 'You'll wait and hear what they say, sir,' the butler said. 'Why, you fool, that's the very thing I've come for!' I answered. I hoped he'd tell his lordship, you see. Then I dropped into a big armchair in the hall, looking absolutely miserable and so nervous I jumped at every sound. I did it all to impress old Dowden, of course, who was looking like an undertaker himself, and snivelling in a corner whenever I looked his way, so I didn't see why he should have all the credit to himself. After all, I'm the old man's son."

Miles paused for a moment to shift one of the candles, dropping as he did so a good deal of grease over the links of Blanche's fine gold chain.

"It was rather slow work, I can tell you. The doctors were such an unconscionable time; and the awful

part of it was, when they did come downstairs, I was reading *Sporting Life*. I pitched it away, of course, at once, and Dowden had the tact to pass me Jeremy Taylor's sermons instead, so I don't think they saw, and I went on wringing Arnold-Pryce's hand quite too distracted to talk. They hemmed and hawed and coughed by way of letting me down gently; but I believe it is all up with the old man this time. They didn't wish to alarm me, they said very nicely, but there was no concealing the fact that Lord Heythorp could scarcely rally after such an acute attack."

"What did you say?" asked Blanche, as she poked diligently at the wax encrusted in her little gold chain with a small pearl-headed pin.

"I can't remember what I said exactly, but I think I quoted bits of the Burial Service. I said, 'For better, for worse,' and 'till death do us part,' and things of that sort; and Dowden said 'Amen,' so I suppose it was all right."

Blanche laughed. "You never could quote, Miles—that was the wedding service," she said.

"What's the odds if it is?" he answered, very little perturbed by his mistake. "It's so long since I was married, and I've never been buried. Anyway, it impressed that oily old hypocrite, Dowden, I can tell you."

"And did you see your father? Did he know you?"

"I went upstairs, if you mean that, and he appeared much more vigorous than I expected, and recognized me at once. 'Is that you, Miles?' he said. 'I'm not dying yet; and remember, if I were, you are the last

person I should wish to see.' I thought he was wandering at first, but the nurse wouldn't hear a word of it. 'His lordship's very lucid and clear in his head this morning,' she remarked; so I thought I had best clear out. But Arnold-Pryce has promised to send me a wire to-morrow, and there's no saying what it may be."

"You will be late for dinner, Miles," Blanche responded dryly. Old Lord Heythrop had never behaved to Miles like a father, and she knew it was useless to expect Miles to behave like a son.

"I put off ordering the new livery. I thought I might just as well wait a bit longer," Miles continued, practically. Twitching the table while he spoke, he upset a bottle of scent. "By the way, have you seen this week's *Country Life*?" he asked, as he endeavoured to sop up the scent with a pair of su  de gloves, the first thing that came to hand. "There's such a charming picture of the duchess in it. My word, she looks more beautiful than ever! Mortimer told me she was here; he seemed to know all the party, and asked if you had gone down with the rest by the early train."

"Miles, you will be late for dinner. You know you can't dress in ten minutes," Blanche replied. Then she turned away to fasten her chain. "How did Mortimer know I was here?" she asked.

But Miles was a great deal more interested in his own affairs.

"I say, Blanche, did Angela know I was coming down by the express?" he asked eagerly.

"You generally know each other's movements, don't you?" said Blanche. "She's expecting a present

from you, I believe, to make up for forgetting her birthday."

"It's rather a handsome present," he admitted, a little shamefacedly. Then he looked at his watch, and ejaculating, "Heavens, my dear, I shall be late for dinner!" went off at length, dragging a chiffon scarf with him, and sweeping all Blanche's rings on to the floor.

Blanche went slowly down one of the broad staircases, wishing to herself the present hour would last for ever. She had done nothing to secure such good measure, it was the fates that were propitious, for here it was thrust into her hand, pressed down, and literally running over—a goodly week-end of three nights and two whole days, which seemed for the moment an eternity of time. Nothing but sudden death could prevent her meeting Mortimer Keppel in a few minutes more, and she had never felt more acutely alive in her life.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton, who always made a point of being in time for dinner when there were visitors at the Castle, was standing by the fireplace speaking earnestly to her eldest daughter. But Victoria was not to be easily entreated, and the arrogant pout on her young, blooming face only intensified as her mother talked on.

"Inchgarvie is devoted to you, you know he is, and prepared to settle anything in reason, so why worry yourself about his hair and eyes? Men with red hair are sure to have sandy eyelashes; it's all in keeping, whether you like it or no."

"He is so slow and silly, and hasn't got two ideas

in his head. Men who are devoted in that sort of way are so dull; I would much rather marry Welcome Guest."

"As to that, my dear, it's no sort of argument; we would all rather marry Welcome if it were merely a matter of choice! But you know as well as I how necessary money is, and any one will tell you about Welcome's debts, they are public property."

The little horde of maxims with which Mrs. Eddy Eaton was endeavouring to preach down her daughter's heart, had not yet come to an end, but Victoria shrugged her shoulders with much impatience, and lounged back in her big armchair.

"I loathe the whole thing, and hate everybody," she remarked vindictively, as she gave the cushions an aggressive thump.

Blanche Heythrop had stopped by one of the tables in the hall to examine the various books that were scattered about. She was an omnivorous reader, and handled the volumes with the touch of a connoisseur. Burke, Debrett, and Kelly's "Landed Gentry"—the writing-table held the usual pile of standards, more furniture than literature; Bradshaw, Whittaker, and some odd green volumes of Tennyson's Poems, into which she dipped for a moment as a relief from the statistical handbooks. She had a considerable knowledge of poetry, and could read it all from Milton to Kipling's last ode. Victoria sat up as she came towards the fireplace.

"How can you read poetry, Mrs. Heythrop?" she exclaimed. "I should as soon think of reading Shakespeare or the *Times*."

"But Shakespeare is poetry, isn't it?" objected Mrs. Eddy Eaton, doubtfully.

"It doesn't rhyme, if it is," answered her daughter; while Blanche, who was not without information on the subject, concluded she might just as well keep it to herself.

"I can read almost anything, provided it is what I can understand," she murmured apologetically.

"I can understand nothing, unless it has happened under my own eyes. I suppose that's why I don't read," Mrs. Eddy Eaton said, as though she had suddenly discovered some great truth. Then she turned to Blanche. "Has your husband arrived, Mrs. Heythrop? The fast train is generally punctual, and I thought I heard the carriage while I was dressing. Do come here and help me to make this foolish child hear reason. I am trying to convince her there is nothing so silly as to think of marrying without there is plenty of money. You agree with me, I am sure; she won't believe what I say."

"Whom do you want her to marry? Is it Mortimer Keppel?" Blanche asked, with an indifferent smile, as it occurred to her this was perhaps why he had been asked to the Castle.

"Who is Mr. Keppel? I don't know him," Victoria answered, as she shook her head.

"No, no, don't confuse her by suggesting Mr. Keppel; he's all very well, but Inchgarvie is the man I mean," interrupted Mrs. Eddy Eaton. "He comes in for all the Forthburgh estates, to say nothing of his mother's money, and if Victoria would but be decently civil, she could bring him to the point in less than no time. But they're all

the same, these girls, so selfish, they think of no one but themselves ; and so spoilt, they won't do what they're told, even when it's for their own good. I've nothing to do with it, it's the Eaton temperament all through, and entirely the fault of their father."

" It's entirely the fault of the men always being the wrong ones. If he ever was the right one, any fool would be glad enough to marry him at once," objected Victoria, rather sulkily; she was still thinking of Wellington Cumberland Guest.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton followed the same train of thought. " It's looks I think myself; looks have a most extraordinary effect on most women—especially Welcome's. I can't explain how it is, but the fact remains, that if a man has blue eyes—really blue eyes, I mean—he is bound to be good looking."

Wellington Guest's gay, careless, irresistible eyes were as blue as veronica.

" He can be good-looking without blue eyes," objected Blanche; she was thinking of Mortimer Keppel.

" But I don't know what's come over men," Mrs. Eddy Eaton continued; " they do everything except fall in love, they're all so clever and so wary. They must be caught in their childhood, or else in their dotage, if anything's to be made of them nowadays. Can you tell me how it is that it is always the men you don't want who propose, and never the ones you do ? "

" Perhaps because the things we want usually come too late," replied Blanche, leaning against the high mantelpiece and gazing rather thoughtfully into the fire.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton regarded her speechlessly for a

and instead of the brilliant hall, only longed again for the privacy of the dingy shed by Southampton Water and a repetition of that tender scene with Blanche that had left such a fond impression on his mind.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton was a consummate hostess, but it never occurred to her Blanche would mind which of the men took her in to dinner ; she thought Major Royle as suitable as any other, so that Blanche and Mortimer only met in passing, and as her hand rested for a moment in his they found it hard to realize that this was at length the meeting they had both so keenly anticipated all through the weary days of the interminable African campaign.

"How do you do ?" said Blanche, with habitual friendliness. "I am so glad you have come home safely. Miles told me he met you in the train."

And Miles himself, who knew her so well, could scarcely have detected any change of countenance as she held out her hand. Yet she was almost childishly happy ; a red carpet should have been laid down, if she had had her way, with a band near by playing "God save the King." It seemed so irreconcilable that they should meet again so quietly, that he should come downstairs and cross the hall and take her hand as if they had only parted yesterday, and as if this meeting again were of no particular moment to either ; she hoped at least she had kept her own face sufficiently under control—she had not dared to look at his. But when people really understand, their words at such moments are of little account, and Mortimer was quite as elated as Blanche. All through the subsequent meal

they were each of them keenly conscious of the other's presence. Such physical well-being had not held Mortimer for long, while to Blanche it seemed as though she were not on earth nor yet in heaven, though perilously near the latter place, and she wondered how it would all end. Though separated by lamps and flowers and the buzz of conversation, he now and then caught a tone of her voice—so different to any one else's—that all the roar and clangour of war had never drowned out of his ears, and once or twice she glanced in his direction, so that Major Royle asked again, as he had asked about the sunset, "What is it? What are you looking at?"

Miles Heythrop came down late—he was seldom in time for any meal—and at once plunged into a detailed account of his visit to his father.

"Poor old man," he remarked, as the whole of the first course was delayed on purpose for him—"poor old man! He has not always played the game with me, but I'm glad now I've been such a good son."

"It's the first time I've heard of you in that *rôle*!" some one objected.

But Miles only shook his head gravely. "I don't want to overdo the thing," he observed, "but you may depend upon it, the more you honour your parents, the better it is for you—especially if the estate is not entailed."

"I hope you mean to remember your friends when you come into your kingdom," cried Wellington Guest; while Miles went on to the episode of Jeremy Taylor and *Sporting Life*.

When dinner was over and every one rose, Keppel drew back his chair and bent forward, so that he might speak a word to Blanche.

"You dropped your handkerchief in the hall; you'll find it inside Tennyson's Poems on the writing-table."

"Thank you so much," said Blanche. "I thought it was gone this time; I could not remember where it was lost."

"You forgot I had come home!" he said reproachfully.

But Blanche shook her head. "It was the only thing I remembered!" she answered. She might have forgotten a thousand things, but she had not forgotten that!

She went to the writing-table in the hall at once, and recovered her handkerchief; but she did not close the book, for where it had been thrust into the volume she noticed a large "M" had been recently written in Mortimer's handwriting, and a cross against one of the verses in "Maud." She took up the book to read the verse and see what he meant, and as she read her colour rose, and a sudden glint of tears came into her eyes.

"Maud, made my Maud by that long loving kiss,
Life of my life, wilt thou not answer this?"

"What can I answer?" she murmured. "How could he remember such a little thing!"

She shut up the book quickly and put it away at the foot of the pile; she was rather glad to think none of the Eaton family had ever opened the book, nor would they ever be likely to do so at any future date.

Mortimer came straight towards her the moment the men came into the hall.

“Did you get your handkerchief?” he asked.

“How could you, Mortimer!” she answered.

“Did you notice anything?” he persisted.

“I noticed nothing!” she declared.

“You have not changed in the least, Blanche,” he said, regarding her attentively.

“Tell me about the fighting,” she began breathlessly. “I am so glad you got two medals.”

But Mortimer Keppel was too proud a man to speak much about himself, even to Blanche.

“What have you been doing? That is much more interesting. Did you cry when I went away?”

Blanche nodded her head silently; it was not often she cried, and she had no wish to dwell on that painful recollection.

“Odious meeting again among this crowd of people, isn’t it?” he remarked.

“You’ve come back, and you haven’t been killed. I don’t see that the people matter.”

“You don’t? I do, then,” answered Keppel; and Blanche dropped her eyes before the expression on his face.

“Did you have a bath every day?” she demanded hastily, to ease the situation.

Keppel laughed. “Hot and cold water laid on—oh yes, we had all that sort of thing.”

“I can’t imagine you dirty,” said Blanche, almost for the first time that night looking straight at the immaculate Keppel.

"There used to be men in England who could boast they had tubbed themselves each morning since they were born ; there ain't many left who can say that now," he replied.

It was safer to talk of bathing than the horrors of war or the pangs of affection. Mortimer's eyes were growing to wear a misty look nevertheless, and Blanche, who had seen that look there before, found her breath growing short.

"Blanche, are you as fond of me as ever?" he asked very quietly.

It was difficult to speak, with so many people so close at hand ; but Major Royle and Angela were playing a game called "Rabbits," the sympathetic nature of which had, for the moment, focussed the attention of everyone else.

"Fonder, I'm afraid. I knew it the minute I saw your suit-case at the station, and when you came downstairs it was worse than ever."

"Why don't you say for better, not for worse ? You seem to have forgotten the whole point of the Marriage Service."

"It hasn't much to do with us in any case," she answered ; which reminded her of Miles, dropping glibly into the Marriage Service in the belief he was quoting from the Burial of the Dead, and they laughed together over his mistake.

"I should like to look at your face for half an hour, yet I daren't look for half a minute," she exclaimed, in duly modulated tones.

"Why not ? Why don't you, Blanche ? I've never

taken my eyes off your face since I came into the hall."

"That's why!" she answered briefly; nor would she explain.

His eyes told their own emphatic tale—more emphatic than speech, and much more eloquent. Speech comes slowly to some men, but the desire of the eyes comes to all, and can never be misinterpreted.

Not that speech came slowly to Mortimer. "I like your dress," he observed.

"I thought you would," she answered; "you always liked lace."

They spoke about such little things; but they were together again—it was all that signified.

"Are you sure you've come back? Oh, Mortimer, if you knew how I used to tear through the list of casualties, and how terrified I used to be! Once I came to a man called Morton Kennedy—he was killed. It made my heart stand quite still."

"Is that why you've got so thin? You are thinner, I believe. You shouldn't have worried like that—where was the good? The whole thing was a toss-up from beginning to end. But I hope you prayed for me," he continued; "and I hope you didn't plump me into the Litany, but that you prayed for me in prayers of your own."

"I can't tell you how I prayed; it's sacred."

"That's all right. I like to have a collect to myself like the King; I hate being classed in a bunch with all the Royal Family."

"I'm dying to say so many things," she responded, half under her breath.

"Say them, beloved, and for one moment let me hold your hand."

The little Empire couch on which they sat just held two, and her pretty white hand rested on the cushioned seat very close to his.

"Please don't," she cried; "it's much too light."

"Oh, Blanche, what a shovel! you've never done anything in the dark in your life!"

She looked furtively at his lean, brown hand, resting so firmly on the back of the seat, and asked him how he knew.

"By your face—you've got such a sinless face. It's not that you look ignorant or innocent, or the least domestic or green; I don't mean that; but you always look to me as if you could touch pitch without becoming soiled."

"Perhaps it's soap and water; I use a great deal of soap."

"Perhaps it is," he agreed. "Cleanliness can be a metaphor, I suppose?"

"Angela used to send Charlie violet soap and chocolates by every mail," she remarked, afraid lest Mortimer's conversation should become more personal still. "Poor Charlie!" she murmured.

"Poor Charlie!" he repeated; "I'd rather not speak of him yet. Can't I get out of it, Blanche?"

"Poor Angela, she's counting on it so!" Blanche began.

But Miles had come in search of her; he wanted her to make a fourth at bridge; and Angela Sunsutton had come to look for Keppel. All the pretty gaiety had

gone from her beautiful face, and her eyes were full of tears.

"You knew Charlie," she said, with a most pathetic catch in her voice. "Can't we sit down? I feel a little faint."

It was Mortimer Keppel who had sent her the woeful tidings; and she turned to him now with tender, anxious gratitude. She heard of Charlie's death at a tea-party, and cried for three days afterwards the bitterest tears she ever shed; which bitter tears, perhaps, were not in vain, for Charlie was destitute [of kith or kin; and spite of his popularity with his fellows, if it had not been for the duchess, there was no one who would actually have wept, which bald, hard fate would have hurt the affectionate Charlie more than aught else.

"I am thinking how his mother would have cried," the duchess had explained to some one who had remonstrated; while her tears fell faster than before.

Mortimer Keppel had been by when Charlie fell, and went back when the *melée* was over to search for the boy. He had written her the facts in a brief, self-restrained note.

"Tell me about Charlie," she begged. "I got your letter—it was very kind; but I want to know more."

"There's not much to tell," he began, rather reluctantly; but he pulled up a low chair for her behind some palms, and asked if she would mind if he smoked? "He was the most fearless man I ever came across," he went on as he lit his cigarette. "There are several sorts of courage, you know, but Charlie had them all.

The wonder wasn't that he got killed, the wonder was that he hadn't been killed five hundred times before."

"Was he killed at once? Did he suffer?" she asked gently, with a woman's thirst for smaller details.

Keppel winced a little; it was months ago now, but not yet did he care to remember Charlie's handsome yellow head lying prone on the African veldt, with a battered leather Prayer-book held close to his rigid lips. He would rather she had taken it all on trust.

"It could not have been at once, because of the book; he was holding it to his lips, you know. But he didn't suffer, I'm pretty well sure of that. He couldn't have been in pain, he'd got such a cheery look on his face. I didn't believe he was dead at first, not for some minutes—he looked so exactly like himself."

But poor Angela could stand no more; she buried her face in her hands and burst into a subdued passion of tears.

"Why couldn't the Boers have shot every one else instead; they might have spared Charlie," she sobbed, in the abandonment of her grief.

"They did their level best to shoot the lot," answered Keppel, soberly.

"There never was any one so good-looking as Charlie. In a pink coat out hunting he was simply divine."

"He was a devil to ride," Keppel agreed, "and just the right build for a horse."

"I can't imagine him dead; and I'm sure Charlie couldn't imagine it either, he knew so little about death.

But I'm glad now I kissed him when he went away. Nothing wrong, Mr. Keppel, we were such dear, dear friends."

"There was nothing wrong in that," Mortimer Keppel agreed—"nothing whatever!"

The duchess liked his tone of calm assurance, and looked up at him a little wistfully. She was very beautiful and in a good deal of real distress; but Keppel had another image stamped upon his mental vision.

"Charlie would certainly have tried to," she murmured to herself; at which cryptic remark she began to cry again. "I must go to bed. Do just look at my face," she exclaimed in despair.

"When you are by I can look at nothing else!" answered Keppel, courteously.

Angela recovered a little. She knew she could cry with impunity; tears never marred her peerless face.

"You will always seem to me quite different to other men, because of Charlie; and I want to ask you something else, only I can't, because it will make me cry again."

"That don't matter, do it? Don't mind me;" and he handed her his handkerchief. "It's quite clean, so you needn't be afraid."

"You said in your letter you would keep the Prayer-book for me—have you remembered?"

"I have it with me now," he answered simply, taking it from his pocket and handing her the shabby little volume. "I'm afraid there's a stain on it. I tried to clean it off, but there was no water," he explained very gently.

The brown stain was Charlie's life-blood, and Angela grew quite pale. Keppel wished she would cry again; he could stand it better than the mute agony in her wide, tearless eyes.

"No one has kissed it since Charlie, have they, Mr. Keppel?" she asked, as she pressed the little book to her lips.

Mortimer Keppel coughed rather uneasily. "No one to signify; no one, that is, but an absent-minded beggar who was more or less crazy at the time," he stammered; and getting up rather hastily he knocked off the end of his cigarette against one of the palms.

SATURDAY

FALLING leaf, and fading tree,
Lines of white in a sullen sea,
Shadows rising on you and me;
The swallows are making them ready to fly,
Wheeling out on a windy sky.
Good-bye, Summer! Good-bye, Good-bye!

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

SATURDAY

Castle Loftus.

THE day following dawned gloriously with a liquid flood of sunshine that bathed the whole country in light. It was one of those unexpected blue days that sometimes usher in the autumnal saints, when summer seems as though she could not bear to tear herself away. The wet bare trees, the damp brown fields, and the lingering yellow herbage, shone like gold in the lustre of the morning, while away out at sea pale bars of opal light lay on the water, with a broad band of dancing gold where the sea met the horizon.

Blanche looked at the sea, and hummed a few bars of a song—"Come back to me, beloved, or I die!" the refrain would keep running in her head.

"A wire about my father—condition graver than ever," cried Miles, interrupting her. "I only hope the old man means to leave me a fat legacy when he is about it; the estate won't clear itself from those damned death duties till this time next year," he added, with much practical foresight.

Neither the duchess nor Mrs. Eddy Eaton appeared at breakfast; Blanche talked French to Mademoiselle all through the meal; while Miles and Victoria wrote

out breathless messages on telegraph forms that were to be despatched to Lord Heythrop at stated intervals all through the day.

Mortimer Keppel followed the French conversation as far as he could, and fell back on asking Blanche to pass him everything within reach, as the next best means of gaining her attention.

"You were nicer last night," he told her, as he waited in the hall for the shooting party to start.

"I can't help it, dear," she answered.

"I hate people who are stiff in the morning. Surely you would rather speak to me than to Mademoiselle?"

"But I wanted to speak French. A silly bit of poetry was running in my head, and if I had spoken in English, or looked at you, I should have said it out aloud, I know I should."

"What was the bit of poetry?" he asked, moving nearer.

"'Come back to me, beloved, or I die!'" Blanche answered softly.

"It's a nuisance having so many leaves on the trees," remarked Eddy Eaton, as he came down one of the staircases, intent only on the day's shoot.

"A confounded nuisance!" agreed Keppel, more inclined to confound his host for having interrupted such a pleasant conversation.

Before they all started off he had time, however, for one word more—

"I never knew there was so much sense in poetry! What made it run in your head?"

"It was when you were away. It won't run in my head so much now," she answered, as she told him to shoot straight and remember his reputation.

His reputation, in conjunction with the others, was a little too good for the startled pheasants. The shivering autumn leaves were no great deterrent to the sportsmen after all; they were little enough refuge to the birds. The day proved an excellent day for sport, quite a record head of game falling to the six guns.

"The meet is at the Goat and Compasses this morning, but I'm not allowed to drive alone, won't you come with me?" asked Beatrice Eaton, the younger daughter, who was supposed to be living an embryo existence in the schoolroom, though she knew as much about the world as her mother, and more about horses than the head coachman at the Castle stables.

And Blanche Heythrop readily agreed. She wanted to get away with her own thoughts for a little. She would be calmer soon, and more accustomed to the amazing vitality Mortimer Keppel always brought into her life.

"I'll tell you who every one is," cried Beatrice, delighted to have found a congenial companion; "and I've made them put up some sandwiches and wine, so that we can stop out as long as we choose. They won't find before Compton Ridge, so we shall be able to follow for some way."

Blanche had no knowledge of children, and was quite without that sympathetic insight, called sometimes the "maternal instinct," that might have enabled her to enter into their pleasures and pursuits. Beatrice was, however, no child in the ordinary acceptation of

the term, and they got on with each other in spite of the gulf, better than might have been expected.

"I can't think what made Eddy fix up a shoot on a day when the meet was this side of the country," Beatrice remarked, as she turned her pony out of the Castle gates.

"Perhaps he prefers shooting to hunting," Blanche suggested.

Beatrice nodded. "He's not a bad shot," she admitted; "but he can't ride for nuts. Yet they won't let me hunt unless he's out too. It would really be more sense if he wasn't allowed to hunt unless I was out! I'm opening gates for him all the time, and finding bridges, and hauling him out of things. I can't think myself why he comes out at all."

"To oblige you, I expect," exclaimed Blanche, who thought she might just as well put in a good word for her host when she could.

"I'm glad he can shoot, but of course I should prefer, for the credit of the family, that he could ride too," Beatrice continued, ignoring Mrs. Heythrop's charitable suggestion.

"What about Victoria—doesn't she care for sport?" Blanche asked.

"Not a bit! She doesn't know a horse's head from its tail. No more does Lord Inchgarvie. I should be sorry to marry a man of that sort myself!" and Beatrice gave her whip a contemptuous flick.

Blanche smiled. "Who, then, shall be saved?" she asked, for Beatrice's standard seemed no easy one to pass.

But Beatrice only understood straightforward speech, and went on again, after a moment's somewhat puzzled scrutiny of Blanche's face—

“Epsom thinks a lot of Mr. Keppel; he used to stop here the winter Victoria was in Paris.”

“And what do you think?” asked Blanche, quite hastily; she was really anxious to know what sort of sentence Mortimer would receive.

“Epsom said, ‘I reckon that 'ere Mr. Keppel he knows a deal about a 'orse, he do’; and Epsom generally knows.”

Against such an authority Beatrice did not presume to quote her own opinion.

“That settles it, I suppose,” answered Blanche; “but I reckon Mr. Keppel knows about a few other things as well.”

Beatrice stared at her again. “Oh yes,” she agreed, “he knows a lot of other things. He can tear a whole pack of cards in half, for I've seen him do it. They *say* it's a trick; but I don't know about that,” she added thoughtfully.

Beatrice had never been snubbed in her life, or told that her opinion of grown people was a matter of no account; neither had any one ever expected her to be diffident or shy—it must be admitted she was neither. So many things were discussed before her, it became a little difficult to remember what were not; the result of all which was, that she observed a good deal more than was ever expected, and knew a good deal more than was ever supposed. Whoever married Beatrice would find her without either nonsense or nerves—whether he would

also find her lacking in other things was a question for time to show.

"I must say I don't envy Victoria having to marry Inchgarvie," she remarked reflectively.

"I wouldn't say that," Blanche cautioned her advisedly.

"I wouldn't say it to any one but you. One can always tell the sort of people who never repeat."

"Whom would you have her marry?" asked Blanche, marvelling somewhat at the child's perspicacity; she would have preferred to go on discussing Mr. Keppel, but feared lest Beatrice should find it out.

"Not Mr. Keppel!" she answered directly, somewhat to Blanche's surprise.

"And why not Mr. Keppel?"

"He would get so tired of Victoria," answered the child, without a moment's hesitation.

"Who taught you all you know?" asked Blanche; the precocious infant was nearly taking her breath away.

"No one ever taught me anything but Mademoiselle, and of course what she teaches me will never do me a bit of good," Beatrice replied.

"How do you know so much about Mr. Keppel?" The question was really more than Blanche could resist.

"I don't suppose I know half as much as you do," Beatrice said generously; she was really a little flattered by Blanche's remarks, and was anxious for her part to be equally agreeable and polite.

But Blanche had no wish to follow up this unlooked-for turn in the conversation.

"What's wrong with the pony's bit?" she exclaimed.

There was nothing wrong, but she knew the subject was one likely to appeal to Beatrice. She could have thought of nothing better for turning the conversation had she tried, and Beatrice became absorbed at once. She was glad Mrs. Heythrop had a mind beyond the eternal subject of women and men.

The promise of the morning died down in the afternoon, it had been a little too brilliant to last; the brief autumnal day was mild but colourless, streaks from a farewell sun shone in the west, and only the report of guns broke the still grey silence. Blanche and Beatrice were not home till late; Beatrice wanted to follow, and Blanche, for her part, had no objection, though she knew the house-party was to lunch with the guns at half-past one, and that she would certainly miss that part of the entertainment. Blanche's sins of commission would always be wisely balanced by the discretion she displayed in omission.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton and the duchess walked up and down the front drive arm-in-arm, discussing exhaustively, from every point of view, Sybil Cobb's preposterous behaviour and the divorce proceedings her husband was bound at once to institute. Every one was discussing the case, as every one knew Christopher Cobb, the outraged husband. Sybil was an Eaton, and closely related to Eddy; her marriage had been carefully arranged without her opinion being consulted. "Where was the use?" said her mother. "She was but a child." Too much of a child to appreciate her husband's wealth, she had, unfortunately, not been old enough to endure

"It's a mistake too many women make. We poor devils aren't fit for them, that's about what it is," observed Mortimer Keppel, as he joined the conversation.

The shooting was over for the day, and he had come round by the paddock, and through the plantation by the back of the drive.

"And yet one must marry somebody!" objected the duchess, pathetically.

"And the best you can do after that is to stick to your husband so long as he sticks to you," added Mrs. Eddy Eaton, who was not without her own curious code of morals.

A yellow sandy road with an avenue of evergreen trees led up to the old grey church; a whispering wind had arisen from the not far distant sea, and the yew trees and cypresses bent their dark boughs. Blanche Heythrop wandered around, reading the quaint, heart-broken legends on the mossy headstones, and wondering where all these dead people had gone to, and whether the absence of marrying, and giving in marriage, would tend to promote a more perfect state of life or not? A few pink roses were still blooming in a fugitive way in a prettily cared-for grave around a white marble cross. "Greatly loved," Blanche read on the stone. In some cases, then, there was no harm in loving even to excess!

As she wandered through the graveyard she was thinking of the time when Mortimer Keppel was nothing in the world to her; it seemed odd now that there could have been such a time. She remembered perfectly the

"She used to say she cared too much for the world to sacrifice herself to either the flesh or the devil. I wish she'd stuck to it," Blanche answered.

"She'd better have stuck to the ills she had," agreed Mrs. Eddy.

"If she ever thought twice it might have been different, but she never does," said Blanche.

"I'm like that," Angela observed, "yet I'd never run away, not even from Gustavus."

"You wouldn't compare Sunsutton to Christopher Cobb, would you?" exclaimed Mrs. Eddy. "And to run away with the creature she has! You can't explain that, Blanche. She must be mad!"

"She never had any sense," Blanche admitted.

"If I did run away, I'd take more care who I ran with," Mrs. Eddy added. Sybil had really outdone herself.

"I'm sorry for her," Blanche protested quietly.

But Mrs. Eddy had no patience with a girl of her age not knowing better. While Angela, with the best of intentions, began to compose a suitable list of the men she might, and ought to, have run away with.

"The mere fact of her running away with the man she has shows she is as ignorant as she is foolish," Blanche declared, as she hurried out of the lodge gates, promising to return shortly.

"The world will not be equally charitable, I fear," remarked Mrs. Eddy Eaton, as she and her companion retraced their steps.

"The mistake she made was in ever marrying him," responded the duchess, conclusively.

world had ever given her before. Once, at a highly strung moment, she had kissed him, it would have been heartless to do otherwise; and now they were friends, dear friends, who had shared a great many scenes of life in common. She asked herself sometimes, how it was all to end? She had even taken into account the sordid ending so common to some friendships; but the vulgarity of such a termination seemed to her merely repulsive. Never was friendship more open than theirs; yet Blanche left it all happily to chance, and never took advantage of any situation that required the smallest sort of finesse. She was no schemer, and could take pleasure in nothing that necessitated scheming or plot; the result of which meant peace of mind to some extent, and left her free from doubts and small despicable fears. Keppel, for his part, thought of nothing but Blanche; he knew he was never so happy, and never enjoyed himself so much as when she was in his company, and his one object—which certainly he prosecuted with vigour—was to see as much of her as he possibly could. He was very strong in his own self-esteem, and would have been sorry to think any woman, least of all Blanche Heythrop, should suffer by his friendship or regard. Mortimer had a good deal of *amour propre*, and valued his own good opinion before any one else's; what other people did was nothing to him, what he did was of the utmost importance—to himself at least.

The idea of injuring a hair of Blanche's head was not to be admitted for a moment, and he turned his mind from the thought with the calm determination of

a man accustomed to regard himself as the exception that proves the rule—

“One word is too often profaned
For me to profane it.”

If Blanche and Mortimer justified their own friendship, however, it is not to say such friendships always flourish with equal impunity.

It was very quiet and still in the little churchyard; a young woman with a baby was weeping by a nameless grave beside the lych-gate, and an old man was grubbing in the earth under the eastern window; otherwise Blanche thought herself quite alone, though she did not start when she heard a man's voice close behind her.

“Are we never to meet again?” Mortimer asked.

“But we have been meeting all day long!”

“You know what I mean,” he answered, as he came and stood beside her.

Blanche was leaning against the Crusader's great stone tomb, and the white light in the western sky shone full on her face. Some dead leaves fell patterning on the grey stone, and the tearless look of sadness in her eyes showed that even Blanche Heythrop could not always hide her feelings.

“We shall often meet like this,” she said, as though it were a lesson she had learned by heart, “and I shall always be glad to meet. Miles will want you to come and stop with us I know, and I hope you'll come. I shall always be interested in everything you do, and when you marry, I hope I shall still be your friend.” Then quite suddenly she broke down a little, while the

evening wind sobbed fitfully in the yew trees behind. "Oh, Mortimer, you don't know how I have missed you! England did not seem the same country when you were away."

She held out her hand, and he took it in his own. She had pulled off her gloves to pick some ivy, and, while they had been talking, had pressed it so tensely against the rough stone that she had actually bruised her skin. Mortimer came a step nearer; the temptation to make Blanche show her feelings was one not easily resisted by the man who had that power; but the sight of the chafed skin on her hand made him suddenly compunctuous.

"I am so sorry, Blanche. I was a brute to worry you. I should never have come."

"It would have been more brutal still if you had stopped in Africa."

Keppel took her arm and pulled her gently down on the gravestone, and they sat there together on the shallow stone step.

"We can talk better so, and I have so much to say. My darling, my beautiful white angel, this is the sort of moment when life is worth living."

The soft wind whispered fitfully, and more dead leaves came patterning down.

"I can smell the sea," said Blanche, but her heart was beating wildly, and she had scarcely breath enough for the few words.

"Did you always know I loved you so much?" he asked.

"How is it one knows?" she answered gently.

"You're very self-contained, dear, and you hide so much of what you feel; but I knew from the very beginning, and at first it terrified me."

"How did you know?" he persisted.

"You always seemed to want to tell everything to me, and sooner or later you were always sure to be there."

"And why were you terrified? I should not have thought you were so silly, Blanche."

"I'm very silly indeed, if you only knew. I sometimes think I have no sense at all, and one ought to have so much," she sighed as she spoke.

"You call it silly to like your best friend, do you?"

"I should never call it silly to *like* you, dear—no one could help doing that."

"I couldn't stand being liked by you. If you hated me, I should endure it; but fancy the insult of being merely *liked*!"

"Yet I like you more than all the rest!"

"You don't!" he exclaimed. "You're either blankly indifferent, or in very real earnest, and I wouldn't be the man I am if I didn't know you loved me."

"Tell me how you knew?" she asked in her turn.

"Knew you loved me?" he answered. "Why, my dear, it was ages before I dared to know. I was never really sure till you kissed me at Southampton. I knew you were never the woman to kiss a man, even supposing he were to be killed next week, unless you pretty well cared for him. But it needed a lot of strength of mind to ask you so boldly and put it to the test."

"I am glad I kissed you—I shall always be glad," Blanche responded composedly. "But I only kissed you because I was certain you knew I wouldn't have kissed any one else. It isn't so bad kissing a man like you—you are a little different, aren't you, dear?"

"As different as chalk from cheese; there's not a mite of harm about me."

"I knew I could trust you," she added hastily, for the scene was well worth repetition, and Keppel had already begun to beseech.

"I should have loathed you, Blanche, if you hadn't loved me, I should have been so furious at your preferring any one else."

"There never were two truer friends, I am sure," she declared, clinging as long as she might to the platonic solution.

But Mortimer was grown sentimental—the night wind was so soft and lonesome, and Blanche's voice so sweet and low.

"Tender and true," he repeated. "That's the Douglas motto; it goes with a bleeding heart."

"But neither of us are called Douglas, and our hearts are not bleeding yet."

"It was my mother's name," he answered briefly.

And as Blanche glanced at his set face she realized sorrowfully how difficult it is for a woman to comfort a man—the gulf fixed by convention is too wide. And yet when Miles came home dejected from a race meeting or the city, she never felt impelled to throw her arms around his neck and whisper in his ear all the

kind, inconsiderable nothings that were now rising to her lips, and blaming herself severely for being a very bad wife, she grew practical again.

"Come," she cried, "we had best be going back; it is getting dark. How did you know I was here?"

"Mrs. Eaton sent me to fetch you; and I can tell you she didn't need to bid me twice! They thought you were much too venturesome, going off like this, all by yourself in the dark."

"I'm not afraid of the dark!" Blanche answered scornfully.

"What is it you're afraid of, then?"

"I was afraid of you just now, when you looked so miserably sad," she admitted reluctantly.

Keppel was, after all, only a very human man.

"You need not feel like that," he cried, "not when the cure is all in your own hands. If you were my wife, Blanche, I'd be damned if I'd let you kiss another man; but, since you're not, I wish you would!"

"You ask too much," she answered, remembering Tennyson's poems; "when you had to go away and fight was the time to embrace—it's the time to refrain from embracing now."

"Then you never mean to kiss me again—not even if I was dying, Blanche?"

"Don't!" she cried hurriedly; "that would be quite different."

"Can't see the moral of that," he objected, "unless it be that dead men tell no tales."

"Live men can, however, tell what they please; you have my full permission."

But Angela declined. "I don't much care about standing on my head, besides my hair would all come down."

The major offered to put it up again; but neither she nor Victoria were to be persuaded.

"All right, I'll have another try. Odd if I don't do it this time," he cried, as he once more swung himself round the back of the chair.

At which unexpected moment a visitor was announced, and a small, alarmed man, in clerical dress, entered the room.

"I've done it!" explained Major Royle, in smothered accents; while Victoria sunk into a big armchair, laughing audibly, and only Mortimer of all the party remained capable of speech.

"They told me I could see Mr. Eaton; I came late on purpose to find him in; but I'm afraid I'm interrupting," the clergyman began.

What it was he was interrupting he did not know at all, and he looked in blank amazement from the somewhat crumpled major to the heaving shoulders of the convulsed Angela, who in desperation had turned her back on them all. He had heard many fearsome tales of the goings-on at the Castle, and wondered a little nervously if things were as black as they were painted; for a clergyman has to remember his cloth. That grown people should amuse themselves as heartily as children was scarcely seemly according to his views; he felt just a little envious at the same time of people who could enjoy themselves so easily, and seem so happy and gay.

“Eaton will be here immediately. Won’t you sit down?” said Mortimer, and it needed a certain amount of self-control before he could even say the few words.

“I’ve been—picking up a pin,” chimed in the major, brightly, determined not to be outdone.

“Oh, indeed!” replied the parson, obviously much puzzled still.

The explanation fell very flat, and Victoria sunk deeper into her cushions.

“Do you know where Eddy is?” Mortimer asked her.

“He’ll never come, so there’s no use you saying he will. He never sees clergymen or people who want subscriptions. We shall have to manage him ourselves,” she whispered in return.

“Can’t I give you some tea?” Blanche proposed, with a tardy remembrance of hospitality; and while she and the duchess plied him with cakes, he confided to them his mission.

“It’s rather a delicate matter, and I’d rather not mention names, but there’s a poor woman in the village who has lost all her teeth, and we’re getting up a little private subscription to get her a new set—a set of false teeth, in fact.”

“Poor thing!” said the soft-hearted Angela, “she’ll get most awful indigestion.”

“As you say, the poor creature has indeed become quite a martyr to dyspepsia, besides having her looks considerably affected. I don’t mean, of course, that that signifies, but it’s really against her getting a

situation; a mistress prefers teeth, you know, when possible."

"How much are teeth?" asked the duchess a little vaguely; the cost of things was a problem that never entered her life, but to lose one's looks seemed to her a grievous fate.

"I say, I wish some one would help *me*," cried Major Royle; "I've never been out of the dentist's hands since I came home from the coast. The climate plays the very devil with your teeth, and the dentist's bill is hanging over me like a nightmare."

The clergyman looked more startled still, less at the major's language, than at what seemed to him his shocking want of taste.

"Nonsense," said Blanche; "you've got beautiful teeth. Here, what do you want to give?"

She and the duchess, with the help of Mortimer, had already got up the necessary subscription between them.

"What do you want?" he asked, as he studied his white, even row of teeth in a glass that hung on the wall.

"I don't know how to thank you, I'm sure. I thought I should have to go all round the parish at least," gasped the overwhelmed parson, as Mortimer showed him out.

"Charity covers a multitude of sins," he murmured, as he picked his way across the gravel sweep; "but what an extraordinarily beautiful face!"—he thought of the duchess, and grew quite pink in the darkness. "And it's not their parish either. Who would have

thought these people would have had so much kindness of heart?"

The society of the county was in the habit of complaining, not without reason, perhaps, that the Eddy Eatons did no good to the neighbourhood. They knew no one from their own choice, which in itself was an insult to people so very willing to know them, and cared nothing even for recognized county magnates, whom every one else respected and feared so much. Mrs. Eddy Eaton paid no heed to the smaller rules of etiquette, and was constantly infringing established social laws. She had, indeed, mortally offended Mrs. Mullein, her next-door neighbour, by never calling, and then one day asking her, without any introduction, to be kind enough to open a gate, as she could not leave a restive horse. It was more than Mrs. Mullein could stand, and most of her friends were full of indignant sympathy. But Mrs. Eddy Eaton would have held the gate open for her neighbour without a thought, to say nothing of an introduction, and never guessed another person should feel differently than she.

"I didn't call on the Mullein woman," she explained, "because I thought, if she was a bore, she would be such an awful bore, living so close to the gates." It seemed to her a sensible view of the case, and one quite as likely to appeal to Mrs. Mullein as herself.

SUNDAY

We two stood there with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well :
The sights we saw and the sounds we heard,
The lights and the shades made up a spell
Till the trouble grew and stirred.

Had she willed it, still had stood the screen
So slight, so sure, 'twixt my love and her :
I could fix her face with a guard between,
And find her soul as when friends confer,
Friends—lovers that might have been.

BROWNING.

SUNDAY

Castle Loftus.

MRS. EDDY EATON always went to church when she was at the Castle. "Any one who likes can come with me," she said. But when the church-going party assembled in the hall they found Miles there before them, white with consternation, standing at the foot of the staircase, reading a telegram, while a footman with a salver waited in the background. The news Miles had been expecting had certainly come, and a sudden constraint fell on the party, so that even Wellington Guest relapsed into silence.

"I hope there's not anything wrong, my dear fellow?" asked Mr. Eddy Eaton, as it was clear some one must speak.

"Anything wrong?" echoed Miles. "Everything's wrong! Here, read this," he cried, holding out the telegram for any one who cared to take it. "Read that, I say, and then ask me what's wrong. 'Pon my soul," he continued irritably, "the old man must have the constitution of a phoenix."

Wellington Guest took the missive and read it out aloud, while every one crowded round to hear.

"'Most unexpected rally. Every prospect of eventual

recovery. No cause for further anxiety.' Well, I'm blessed ! " he remarked, and he looked up at Miles with a somewhat whimsical expression in his eyes.

"Blessed, indeed ! I'm the other thing myself. Don't look at me like that," cried Miles, savagely. "Remember how you'd feel yourself, and behave like a Christian if you're not one."

"I was going to congratulate you on your father's recovery," Wellington Guest began a little blankly, in a voice of profuse apology, but with the same careless smile in his eyes.

"Is there an answer, sir ?" asked the footman, at last venturing to remind Miles that he was still waiting.

"An answer, you fool ? What do you suppose I want to answer ? You don't expect me to congratulate the old man, do you ?" Miles growled in reply, much too exasperated to heed what he was saying.

"Miles !" exclaimed Blanche, gently shaking his arm. "Here give me a telegraph form, will you ?" she asked, as she proceeded to write quickly, "Trust improvement continues. Many congratulations.—Blanche, Miles."

She read it aloud, as every one was so much interested in the incident.

"I don't know what else I could say," she added, as she counted the words.

"You must pay for it yourself," vowed Miles. "I'm not going to perjure myself, not even to the extent of sixpence ; and you've no right to sign my name either. I never gave you leave."

But Blanche found her own sixpence, and the footman went off at last.

"Poor, dear Lord Heythrop," murmured Wellington Guest, in his equivocal voice, "who would ever have guessed you would play your son such a heartless practical joke!"

Miles was much too perturbed to attend divine service that morning. His calculations were all of them completely upset—filial concern of a sort on the one hand, and a heavily anticipated patrimony on the other, the nature of the case was certainly unique, and more than trying to a man who at all times liked to express himself in loud and vigorous speech. He never made any effort to hide his feelings, and retired now much chagrined, to look his affairs in the face, and to write to his lawyer—two somewhat unpleasant tasks, the prospect of which did not tend to soothe his sorely ruffled nerves.

"I tell you what it is, Blanche, we shall have to travel back third class, and I shan't be able to give any one Christmas presents," he observed, as he finally crushed up the telegram that had been the cause of so much dismay.

Major Royle was standing by with a Prayer-book held ostentatiously under his arm, and the profoundest expression of ingenuous sympathy on his face.

"We're going to church, Miles. Shall I ask the parson to pray for your poor father; it's often done in cases of this sort?" he asked in a grave, concerned tone of voice, while Wellington was quite as anxious to help.

"Can't we get up a testimonial or a sweepstake or something? I don't at all like the idea of Miles travelling third class."

"I say, Mrs. Heythrop, do you think it's safe to leave him alone?" Major Royle continued confidentially. "He's had a nasty shock you know, and I'll stop with him while you're gone. I can always go to evening service," he added, more in deadly earnest than ever.

But before the much-tried Miles could reply, Blanche had put her hand firmly before his mouth.

"Hush, dear, *don't!* Do remember where you are," she cried soothingly.

"What was he going to say? You'll tell me, Mrs. Heythrop, won't you?" persisted Wellington.

"Not for worlds!" answered Blanche, so hastily that every one laughed.

Major Royle took up his large Prayer-book once more. "That's what I call a really good wife," he remarked with a deep sigh.

The Duchess of Sunsutton was clad in silvery grey this morning, with white fur round her shoulders, and a mass of pale blue tulle swept by a jet black plume resting on her beautiful brilliant hair. Her face was like apple blossom and her eyes like purple pansies—nothing could have been more exquisite than her dazzling appearance, and Mr. Eddy Eaton, who walked by her side, could scarcely take his eyes for a moment off her face. Occasionally, with a mighty jerk, he forced himself to look at the landscape, while he did what he could to prevent his conversation being nothing but a series of personal remarks. The duchess, for her part, found it just as difficult to refrain from what is euphemistically termed "making eyes" at her infatuated host—her eyes were made that way in all innocence from the

day she was born, and not to use them was pretty well a physical impossibility.

“I hope my hat’s straight? you seem to be looking at something,” she asked at last, transfixing him with her lustrous orbs.

“I am looking at something, but it’s not your hat!” answered Eddy Eaton, with a killing glance.

Earlier in the year Eddy Eaton had entertained a royal visitor at Castle Loftus; on that occasion, when his party entered the little church, the simple congregation, from ignorance or loyalty, had risen to their feet with one accord. They were apparently going to repeat this precedent again when he came up the aisle escorting his beautiful guest—who had, indeed, turned wiser heads than those of such simple rustics—had it not been for the Scotch gardener, a stickler where etiquette was concerned. He saw how it was at once, and rising indignantly from his seat, interfered very audibly in a hoarse whisper.

“Sit doun, the whole o’ you—sit down! Dinna ye ken we’re all equal in the sight o’ God, the like o’ duchesses an’ all, unless it be his Majesty the King, an’ he’s no here the day?”

Blanche turned ever so slightly round so that she should catch Mortimer’s eye; he always heard what she heard, and what amused her was always sure to amuse him.

“A nasty one for the duchess,” he whispered in a modulated tone, as he slipped into the seat beside her.

“Why do you go to church, Mrs. Heythrop?”

“Why do you, my friend?” answered Blanche.

"Solely that I may have the pleasure of sitting next you."

But Blanche had opened her Prayer-book, and refused to look up.

In following the service Major Royle was almost ostentatiously devout. He was indefatigable in finding hymn-books for every one, and insisted Mrs. Eddy Eaton should share his Prayer-book, though she had one of her own, finding all the places for her, so that she had to follow whether she would or no. If the major was volatile, he was also profound, and Blanche watched him in a furtive way till the clergyman gave out the Psalms for the day. "The fourth day of the month, the nineteenth Psalm," he read out, and the congregation broke into a well-known chant. Thick golden sunshine shone in through the narrow windows, and suddenly her own amazing capacity for happiness came over Blanche with a sort of lightning thrill. She sang on, however, without seeking to dispel the charm of the moment, and trying not to realize how great a contentment the safe proximity of Mortimer could arouse.

"Thou hast given me my heart's desire: and hast not denied me the request of my lips;" it was not often any mortal could sing the words from his heart, but Blanche was unreasoningly glad that morning. Whether it had been the request of her lips or not, she had got her heart's desire, and nothing could shake the fact. She wondered if it were wrong to feel so glad; if so, it were surely equally wrong that either she or Mortimer had ever been born? The compunction made her think for a moment very tenderly of poor Miles and all his

financial perplexity, but her nature was in broad, straight lines. Too much introspection was only morbid, and the ecstatic words of the psalm rang blissfully in her ears.

When the sermon began, Major Royle crossed his knees against the book-rest, inserting, for some reason of his own, his large Prayer-book, so that the heavy volume was only held in place by the force of his knee. An inadvertent movement on his part, and down it would have fallen with a startling crash. It would really be simpler to put the book on the book-rest and cross his knees in peace, Mrs. Eddy Eaton pointed out with a good deal of reason; but the major shook his head and declared, to fix the book thus was the only way he could sit. He delighted in such small feats of prowess; but his fidgety behaviour fairly distracted Mrs. Eddy, who kept her eyes fixed on the book in a kind of fascinated anticipation, and did not hear one word of the sermon.

Mortimer Keppel followed the service quite as attentively as the major, but with less ostentation. If a man went to church, he must remember he was in church, and behave accordingly, was his view of the case—which did not prevent him observing Blanche's least movement, or settling into rather a gloomy fit of abstraction as the text was given out. Blanche glanced once at his profile, and then she turned to Victoria, who sat at her other side. Mortimer looked so grave and polite and sad, she feared his thoughts were not so sweet as her own. If she could have put her hand on his arm she could have cheered him in a moment, but she dursn't even look him full in the face. Victoria was

not understand. Miles could never write anything, neither a trivial note nor an important document, without reading it all out to her first; and Mortimer, when he could, was almost equally dependent.

"How do you think this sounds?" he began, quite ignoring Lady Mabel, who was just in the act of begging Mrs. Heythrop to write an excuse in answer to an unwelcome invitation—she herself had not the most remote idea what to say.

"Suppose we go and see old Dawlish," Eddy Eaton proposed at lunch. "I want Royle to see his stud farm, and Beatrice wants to hear what was the end of the run yesterday. You'll come, won't you?" he asked Angela Sunsutton.

Sir David Dawlish was one of the few local magnates with whom the Castle cared to fraternise, a deadly fear of being bored warning them off most of the sober halls and respectably moated Granges of the neighbourhood.

But Sir David belonged to other than a provincial world, and set his clocks to a faster pace than his county neighbours. His racing reputation alone made his name an international one, and no one need suffer from *ennui* who could listen to his cheerful vigorous conversation, replete as it was with the very latest expression in slang, and liberally garnished with the broad county *patois* that he had learned to perfection from his local grooms.

The duchess was delighted to go. Sir David was a dear, she said, and just the sort of man one could never meet too often.

"What sort of a man is that?" asked several voices eagerly.

But Angela refused to be drawn.

"Let us all go," Mrs. Eddy exclaimed. "Lady Dawlish always goes to sleep on Sunday afternoon, so she will never know what a host we are."

"I can take four in my car; the back seat holds three with ease," cried Major Royle, who was as pleased as any child with a new toy.

"I must walk, I am getting over-weight," Miles said gravely. "Blanche can walk any distance. She nearly walked me off my legs the other day," he continued in aggrieved tones.

"It didn't seem long to me," Blanche answered.

"It's Miles's conversation that carries one along, I've noticed it myself," added Mrs. Eddy; there was a general feeling that Miles was entitled to considerate treatment that day.

Time never hung heavy at Castle Loftus, there was always something to do, which is much the same thing as being able to do what you like; the Eatons were so fond of novelty themselves that nothing their guests might do would have seemed to them absurd. "Carpe diem," was their motto, whether they were aware of it or not—or whether, for the matter of that, they could have any of them translated the words.

It was "Carpe diem" with Blanche and Mortimer that afternoon, but the will was stronger and the spirit so much the more intense, and they only wearied to shake off their companions, and get right well away from them all. There was a buoyant sense of tartness in the air that denoted a frost to come, and the world they traversed that still autumn afternoon was fair as

it well could be. Between dried heather and furze bushes a broken path led across the sandy brake ; the open common was on every hand, fading beautifully into a soft purplish blue in the distance, and rising darkly in front against a long rosy sky, where Loftus Beacon stood out clearly against the level sun.

"We are going round by the Beacon, are we not?" Blanche had asked Victoria, as they all started off.

But there were many paths across Loftus Brake, and the party became separated by degrees, so that Keppel and Blanche were soon walking alone, accompanied only by Victoria's three dogs, who preferred to keep pace with the advance party. Blanche rather non-plussed Keppel at first—no one could more readily hold out the right hand of fellowship than she, but no one was at the same time more adroit at keeping her friends at a distance. To be treated by Blanche as the very best of good comrades was all very well in its way, but Keppel wanted more. A superficial observer might frequently have accused Blanche Heythrop of lack of sentiment, it was Keppel's contrary knowledge that made him so insatiable. And now, though the veil between herself and Keppel had grown thin to transparency, and though the satisfaction he experienced in being with her was only to be measured by her own felicity, she spoke of anything and everything but love as they walked on side by side. It was a difficult friendship, and Blanche felt bound to observe her own rules. She scarcely knew how much her life was dominated by his—a domination of the sort is usually subconscious—but she relied on him without question,

never doubting his point of view ; and as they talked on, he was scarcely surprised to find how well versed she was in all the salient points of his particular part of the recent campaign, he had learnt ere this what a singular aptitude she had for grasping things she could by no possibility have experienced. She spoke of battle, murder, and sudden death, with keen solicitude ; she discussed staff officers from the soldier's point of view, and parliamentary affairs with an acumen all her own. She plied Keppel with so many apposite questions, that at one moment he was surprised by the amount he knew, and at the next amazed at the depth of his own ignorance. He was a clever man, and enjoyed, as a person of wits must, meeting, and being able to hold his own, with some one as clever as he ; besides which, Blanche's conversation whetted his appetite in a curious way—she made him feel so acutely alive, and infused a streak of passionate desire into subjects that had never interested him before. He never wondered how it was she knew so much, being a modest man it did not occur to him that any of it should have come from himself ; but it was no use evading the fact or trying not to care, he might have met every woman in the world without ever feeling as he did now if Blanche had not been included in the number. She answered his every desire, and responded to all his ideas. Her engrossing conversation kept all his faculties at work, and prevented him thinking of other things, which was perhaps what Blanche intended. He was, however, keenly aware of her all the time, even to noticing the fugitive whiff of a faint scent he knew and had loved of old, and as they

talked he looked down at her flushed and eager face, noticing every shade of expression, and listening to every tone of her voice, with an appreciation that almost amounted to sorrow. Miles, for all his belief in Blanche, had never looked at her in that sort of way, it was also totally different to the fatuous stare with which Mr. Eddy Eaton regarded his beautiful duchess.

The questions Blanche had been saving up took long to answer, they had gained the Beacon on the brow of the moorland before she paused. The dogs still held on, but the rest of the party were long since lost to view. Victoria, claiming Wellington as her own, with all the zest of forbidden fruit, had struck down a deep cart track and vanished quite early in the afternoon. Miles, left with Lord Inchgarvie and another, was gradually forgetting his grievances, over the interest of explaining all the advantage and intricacy accruing to a New River share, one of which was shortly to revert to the wholly apathetic Scottish peer, who could not be brought to see the distinction of possessing a king's share and having a seat on the board.

"You may as well make hay while the sun shines, it will all be changed soon," Miles declared.

But Lord Inchgarvie was fondly dwelling in his own mind on the becoming shape of Victoria's hat. They were, however, far behind, bearing away to the left, having quite forgotten that Loftus Beacon was to have been the object of their walk.

Life can be so perfect at times it becomes easy to realize what heaven is like. It was Blanche who wondered at the bounteous hours; Keppel accepted it

all without thought. But a silence fell between them as they climbed to the Beacon, and paused to take breath at the top. They stood in a golden mist with a soft shadowy land far below, and Blanche, who had no desire to gain a lover and lose a friend, tried to distract his attention almost impatiently.

“Look at that sky! Did you ever see such a sunset?” she cried.

The sky was brilliant gold, and the atmosphere so dazzling that the land they had left behind was become altogether invisible. The glossy spaniel, racing round, was a black silhouette against the light, and the tawny little terrier was outlined with a halo of gold.

“It is going to freeze,” Blanche said in her pretty voice.

“So long as you are not going to freeze, the weather may jolly well do what it pleases. If I did not know you were made of gold, Blanche, I should sometimes think you were made of steel.”

“We all seem made of gold up here to-night,” she replied, suddenly realizing that the power of talking small talk had completely deserted her.

When they arrived at Castle Loftus on Friday evening, they had looked forward to hours of each other’s society, and now they were both of them jealously counting the minutes. Keppel rested on his stick with his hand against his side.

“You are sometimes very sweet, Blanche, and divinely kind, but you never let yourself go.”

“Oh, Mortimer, how can you!”

“You don’t. You’re always thinking it’s not wise,

or it's not proper, as if there ever was any sort of pleasure in things that are wise and proper! How can you expect me to sympathize with that?"

Blanche drew nearer and slipped her hand into his arm; she said he was unreasonable, and never put himself in her place.

He drew her hand gently through his arm, and they strolled on together.

"I love being unkind to you, Blanche; I should have made such a cruel husband if we had been married."

"I know you would; but you needn't think I should have cared."

"We would never have bickered, though, I could never stand that. My word would be law, and my smile your greatest reward."

"That's not my idea of felicity," she objected. "I could never, never obey."

"You'd obey me right enough. I see myself being browbeat by my wife!"

"I'm a great deal more obstinate than you would suppose, and I'm often ashamed of my temper."

"You've never been angry with me. I'm not afraid of that, dear."

"What a lovely sunset!" exclaimed Blanche, a little desperately.

"Damn the sunset! I shall not be able to see your face soon."

"When I am away from you, Mortimer, I often try to remember what you're like. Of course, I really know, but when I'm with you, I never look at your face."

"What do you look at, then?"

"I don't know, I'm sure; and I can't explain it to you if I did."

"You've got far too much imagination, that's what it is; you imagine so much, you forget where the reality ends. I'd rather you looked things straight in the face, especially myself. I always wonder what you're thinking about when you do."

"What you would be like if you were really angry—angry with me, I mean? I often think of that."

"I expect so much of you, dearest, that if I was angry, I should probably be very angry indeed."

"How awful!" said Blanche. "Polite men are always so cutting and cruel. I would sooner be abused in the ordinary way."

"I could do that, too," he assured her. Then he looked at her with a jealous air. "What do you know about abuse in any case?"

"Nothing—nothing to speak of. Abuse is the sincerest form of flattery, Angela says. The only people who ever scold her, or find fault, are her truest friends; she has had so much flattery, I think she quite enjoys it for a change."

"What's that about a woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they be? Angela's exactly that sort."

"*She* may be," Blanche admitted doubtfully.

"All right, my love, I never said you were! You should be treated with kindness, you overdo the Spartan business as it is."

"Poor Angela," observed Blanche, "she was so fond of Charlie!"

"Poor Angela!" echoed Keppel. "Awfully hard hit,

wasn't she? I'm almost sorry I didn't kiss her now; I believe she is accustomed to being kissed when she cries. But I only like kissing women who don't want to be kissed."

"Men were certainly intended to be fools—they are such beasts when they are not."

"Angela is a beauty, any man beside her is bound to be a beast!"

Blanche admired the duchess immensely, and was willing enough to discuss her charms.

"Why don't you say something? You know you admire her, too."

"Say?" repeated Keppel, a little absently. "He said, 'She has a lovely face. God in His mercy has made her her Grace!' There's not much more to be said about Angela, is there?"

"There's more in her than you would think," persisted Blanche.

"Perhaps so, but I'm not very fond of beautiful women. The woman I adore is divine."

"Oh, don't!" cried Blanche, still clinging to his arm; "it isn't really kind to speak to me like that. I sometimes think you should go away."

"Where the deuce should I go to, unless to the devil? I should be bound to come back to England, after a bit."

"If you went big-game shooting, don't you suppose you might forget?" she suggested hesitatingly.

"The biggest slaughterer can't go on shootin' big game for ever, and it would require a lifetime before I should forget you," he answered briefly.

Blanche sighed a little weariedly. "We had better be going back, I'm rather tired," she said.

"I've brought you too far," he answered, growing compunctuous, as he always did, if Blanche made the smallest allusion to herself.

She had succeeded in turning his thoughts, however, and then immediately regretted having done so; to be cared for by Keppel was a sensation to which she had been for too long a stranger.

"I'm never really tired when I am with you," she hastened to explain.

He looked at her ruefully. "But you're with me so seldom! You may be tiring yourself to death for all the good that I can do. You don't know how to take care of yourself, and I can't tell you what your life means to me."

His dejected attitude made her miserable, till he scowled; then she was reassured. The strenuous man who can scowl ceases to be a problem, and she turned away to call the dogs.

Several eager men were striving who should teach the duchess bridge that evening. "Promise not to get cross with me," she implored; while they vowed and swore such a thing was not possible even to imagine. Blanche was glad to observe that Miles was one of the favoured trio; she was genuinely sorry for her husband, and full of faith in the charms of Angela Sunsutton. With a dull ache at her heart, for the time was now so short, she collected all the weekly magazines, and settled herself comfortably on the staircase, where she was soon joined by Mrs. Eddy Eaton, who regarded Blanche with an odd sort of curiosity; she could not comprehend her, but hoped to do so one day, and meanwhile lost no opportunity for an interchange of views.

could be more childish and unreasonable? I can't think where she gets them from—certainly not from me."

"If she were fonder of him it would be easier; and yet the odd thing is, that Lord Inchgarvie will make such an excellent husband!"

"Will he?" exclaimed Mrs. Eddy Eaton. "I should never have guessed it myself; and I'm perfectly sure it's the last thing that would ever enter into the calculations of a self-willed creature like Victoria. But how do you know which men make good husbands, and what are the signs? Eddy, now, what would you say about him? At the same time, it's only fair to say that Eddy is by no means a fool; if he is not wise, he is at least aware of his folly, and has the sense to recognize the value of other people's brains. He thinks a lot of you, Mrs. Heythrop, and the books you read. Though I can't see myself how you ever find time for reading."

"One can generally find time for doing the things one wants to do. But I'm not clever. Judging characters is instinct, and the most primitive person is often the nicest judge. Even dogs have the instinct to know who will make a good master."

"I have only known one man treat his wife like a dog," Mrs. Eddy remarked thoughtfully. "But husbands aren't masters—mine isn't, at least. I should be sorry to admit they were to the best of men, far less to a man like Eddy, whose head is so easily turned."

"I shall make a most masterful husband," remarked Mortimer Keppel from above; he had gone up one staircase to come down the other, where Blanche and his hostess were sitting, so that he might join their conversation.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton started. "We're talking about husbands," she explained. "Mrs. Heythrop declares she can tell in a moment if a man would make a good husband or not. She's very clever, you know, and an excellent judge of men."

Keppel seated himself a few steps higher up. "You know nothing bad of them, I'll be bound," he replied, in complacent tones.

"On the contrary, we were trying to find out if there was any good," cried Mrs. Eddy Eaton. "They say women judge all men by their husbands, whether they will or no. It biasses you, I must acknowledge, and no doubt makes you a little unjust, for familiarity is so apt to breed contempt. But men are very much alike, you must admit they are, Mr. Keppel."

"Women are not," said Mortimer, courteously. "They differ as one star from another in glory; but only one in ten thousand is a competent judge of men."

"It is just as rare to find a man who understands women," objected Mrs. Eddy Eaton. "They are so rare I could count the ones I know on the fingers of one hand. Eddy doesn't, not one little bit; he sometimes says the cruellest things without ever guessing he is hurting your feelings, and he never by any chance remembers your likes or dislikes. Welcome, now, is so different: he never says a word too much, or presses you with awkward questions. He is quite prepared for you to forget things he asks you to do, and does not even get cross if you forget to send off his wires; he knows how many excuses one has, and makes allowance for everything. He is so kind and sympathetic too:

would never think of marrying a woman for her expression, he likes good looks."

"I perceive he does!" agreed Mortimer, with a little bow. Then he bent forward. "I thought you were going to tell us your views on husbands, Mrs. Heythrop. I should so much like to hear."

"So should I," echoed Mrs. Eddy Eaton. "Then one could draw comparisons. What is your idea of marriage?"

"As much affection as possible, and as little interference," Blanche answered, smiling a little; it always amused her to treat Keppel like a stranger.

"Rather a wide definition. How much affection would you think possible?" he asked.

"One can't always let one's self go!" said Blanche, referring to their conversation of the afternoon.

"Of course not," Mrs. Eddy Eaton agreed; she did not know the conversation had any but the obvious meaning; "it would never do—it makes a man above himself at once. If you love your husband, you're a fool to ever let him know it. I, myself, am really very fond of Eddy, yet I am sure no one would ever guess the fact."

"I'll be bothered if I'll let my wife hide her affection. I don't see the fun of that; there's a limit to self-control," Mortimer observed, rather pointedly.

"As to you and your wife, Mr. Keppel, you expect far too much. I'm quite sure you have never met this paragon you are always describing," Mrs. Eddy Eaton replied.

"I don't know about that," Mortimer said evasively. Then he pressed once more for Blanche's views on husbands. "I should have thought your ideal of a

husband was a man a good deal like myself. Mrs. Eddy Eaton's is, I'm sure?"

"It's not a fair question to ask either of us when our husbands are by. I'm not going to have Eddy insulted in his own house," exclaimed Mrs. Eddy, with some tardy recollection of her marriage vows.

"All questions are fair in discussions on love or war. *My* wife would know her ideal too well to hesitate," he persisted, still thirsting to hear his own character described by Blanche.

"As to hesitating, the question is simple enough, the ideal marriage is marriage with a duke. On the whole, I consider a duke more satisfactory than a foreign prince, certainly than a morganatic one; morganatic marriages always seem to me like gingerbread without any of the gilt, and in marriage the gilt is everything, you know."

Mrs. Eddy Eaton could never be accused of lack of opinions, or of the necessary courage to express them.

Mortimer raised his eyebrows. "I have no great opinion of the gilded youth myself, the elderly commoner is a much more romantic type."

But Mrs. Eddy Eaton had turned to Blanche. "Perhaps you have never met your ideal of a husband, Mrs. Heythrop?"

"What price Miles?" exclaimed Major Royle, joining their conversation, to be followed by various other members of the party who also gathered round the staircase; the discussion acted like a magnet, for most persons have views on marriage, if they know no other subject.

"Impossible!" declared Keppel, answering for

Blanche himself. "Mrs. Heythrop met her ideal a long time ago."

Miles, who had drawn near, was not slow to join the discussion. He was always genuinely interested in his wife, and often puzzled, as he had never been able to discover just how much of everything she really knew.

"Thanks, Keppel," he said, nodding complacently in his direction, "no need to be more personal. Some men show amazing sense in the women they marry. Thank Heaven, I'm one of that sort. Marriage is an awful lottery else."

Mrs. Eddy Eaton fully endorsed his lottery view of the case, which reminded her once more of the impending proceedings between Sybil and her husband.

"No one knows the rights of the case," she continued.

"We all seem to know the wrongs!" responded Miles, as they plunged with mutual consent into a technical discussion on the laws of divorce, with which subject they both appeared singularly well-informed.

Under cover of their argument, Blanche turned to Keppel.

"How could you be so odious? You made me quite uncomfortable!"

She leant back against the bannisters as she spoke, and looked him in the face at last. Her dark hair, a little disarranged, fell low on her forehead. She was indignant, and the necessity of suppressing her indignation had brought a clear glow of colour into her face, for her complexion was as variable as even Keppel desired; but the expression in her dark blue eyes was enigmatic. A great deal of art about the soft folds of her white silk dress had produced a careless effect of subtle simplicity,

but her heart beat more quickly than usual under the delicate network of lace that was draped over her shoulders.

"I like playing with fire, and I like to see you change your expression. But you might have said a good word for an old friend, when he took so much trouble to give you a lead! You have some sort of opinion of me, haven't you, Blanche?"

"My dear Mortimer——" she began, still in the same tones.

But Mortimer interrupted her. "Anything in the world, if only you will call me *dear Mortimer*!"

"I should leave by the early train, but I'm too low-spirited to get up at six. We'll go by the 10.15," said Miles, as every one began to say good night.

"Which reminds me, Mrs. Heythrop. What about your ghost? You haven't seen him yet, have you?" asked Wellington Guest.

"It's not that sort of ghost!" Mrs. Eddy Eaton declared; "it's something fiscal or psychic—I forget the correct term; and you must have something on your mind, else it won't haunt you at all. I should have thought you were just the sort of person to see it, Blanche; it only affects cultivated minds. Eddy has slept there times without number, and only dreamt he had gone to a *levée* in—in— What was it in, Eddy?"

"Little enough!" responded her husband, dryly.

Ignoring a hilarious request for further details, Mrs. Eddy Eaton continued her explanation of the haunted room.

"If you had committed a murder, now," she explained, "you would be haunted all night through by dreams of nothing else. If you have nothing of any

importance on your mind, why, of course, you sleep like a Christian; but people have often told me what singularly vivid sort of dreams they have had in that room."

"I haven't committed a murder, I'm afraid," said Blanche.

"I only mentioned murder for an instance; if you were in debt—or in love, for the matter of that—it would have just the same effect."

"Are we in debt, Miles?" asked Blanche.

"Perhaps you are in love?" suggested Mortimer Keppel.

"All married women are in love—with their husbands, I mean," observed Major Royle, piously.

"I have heard that nothing idealizes a person so much as for one to dream about him," began the duchess, ingenuously.

But Mrs. Eddy Eaton did not see that point. "I've dreamt of my dressmaker before this, and I've often dreamt of Eddy. Oh, there's nothing in that theory, I'm sure."

Mortimer Keppel waited at the foot of the staircase, and bowed low over Blanche's hand as he said good night.

"Won't you tell me what your room is haunted with?" he asked.

"Some people are haunted by a ghost of the past. It often worries me to think of all the silly things I have done."

"Don't talk of the past. I often wonder if I lived at all before we met. God knows what life would be without you, Blanche!"

At the top of the staircase she paused for a moment and looked back. Keppel was a tall, spare man, with an indefinable air of his own that made him the most distinguished figure in almost every sort of company.

Blanche had the keenest appreciation for all his points ; they gave her a sort of pride, in which she dared not indulge ; and to-night she was more than ever sensible of his charm. He was still standing behind the palms, just as she had left him, his well-groomed head was a little bent, and he had not yet lit the cigarette that he held in his hand. She only paused an instant, but as she turned away he looked up, and for that instant they caught each other's eyes.

Whether due to the conversation on ghosts or not, Blanche slept but little that night. She watched the fire burn down and the firelight die away. It was too much love of living that kept her awake ; her pulses were beating, and a wild, tearing wind seemed to be blowing on her face. She let her fancy run riot, and even the downpour of rain failed to check her madness ; for the promised frost had broken after all, and she could hear the rain dripping heavily outside. Yet it was not a ghost of the past that was haunting her to-night. She and Mortimer had been friends long before he went to Africa ; Miles himself had brought them together, and done all he could to encourage the friendship, being rather proud that his wife should be able to hold her own with Mortimer Keppel, and rather glad that his own friendship should be thus cemented.

Blanche had married Miles on nothing more than a rather strong predilection, with the idea that her rather reasonable affection would ripen with time into something more deep, or in any case prove more reliable than the glamour of a blind devotion, always so liable to bring its own awakening ; and so far her lot had fully justified

her sentiments. Miles would have married her at the time in spite of any qualms or questionings, and when she openly told him of her feelings, only laughed at her scruples and begged her to fix the wedding-day. He loved constant movement and excitement, into which he counted on Blanche entering with as much zest as he, and he never thought—which saved him from ever fully comprehending his wife, or wondering if the depth in her nature was to be so lightly satisfied. She found him always a good companion, who at the same time expected her to find her own amusements. She sympathized with most of his tastes, and shared many of his friends; his claims on her affection were not hard to satisfy. Marriage is always a hazard to persons whose feelings are deep and whose characters are strong; few other men would have made her even half as happy; and fully realizing this, Blanche, who was tolerant, had grown to have a great deal of affection for Miles. With his insatiable love of gaiety and fun, it would have been at her own cost had she cultivated anything more, and so far their life had been a distinct success.

Then Blanche met Keppel, and was amazed to find what a deeper, fuller, more rapturous meaning everything had begun to have. Before he went to Africa she had not been sure—not until he kissed her in the shed at Southampton. Now that he had come back and they had met again, she knew that life was love; but she still called it friendship, and valued it as something much too precious to jeopardize. Always a difficult position—to persons of less force of character it might easily have been an illicit one; but had Miles been a

MONDAY MORNING

Castle Loftus.

IT was raining steadily next morning, a mild grey downpour, with a damp mist lying low all over the wet landscape ; the trees dripped with moisture, and the undergrowth was a sodden colourless mass. The prismatic radiance of the day before had vanished like a dream, heath and holt and autumnal plantation having clothed themselves in a depth of gloom that gave no promise of any change. Blanche was always influenced by the atmosphere, but Miles's was a much more equable temperament.

"Miserable weather," said Blanche, as she looked out at the damp park.

"Rainin', isn't it ?" answered Miles, indifferently. "Angela has promised to go with us to the play to-night. What do you say to Carden for a fourth ? and where do you think we should sup ?"

The Monday morning that concludes a week-end visit is always a crowded hour. Every one had to get somewhere before night, and railway time-tables were sought for in haste. Mrs. Eddy Eaton had never caught a train on her own merit in her life, and never attempted to catch her guests'.

"Leave it to the coachman," she said; "if you miss the train I shall consider it his fault entirely."

"Hullo!" exclaimed Victoria, who was seated on the low guard by the fire skimming through the morning paper. "Lady Sylvia Kent is going to marry Jimmy Avon!"

The news electrified the entire party, and every one stopped eating. Lady Sylvia, a gay worldling of much individuality, had been a widow for only six months.

"What!" cried Eddy Eaton. "The boy's young enough to be her son."

"He's a good deal younger than her son; Jimmy only came of age last month," Victoria replied, as she read the notice out aloud.

News had to be a little astounding to arrest the Eddy Eatons, but Lady Sylvia's preposterous career had made her a subject well worth discussion. That she should marry some one had only been a question of how long the man she selected would remain proof against her charms; that she should marry Lord Ringwood's youngest son, a penniless youth who had scarcely attained his majority, was a sufficient puzzle to interest the most careless mind.

"She ought to be tried for child-stealing," Major Royle observed, as he recovered from the shock, and proceeded to help himself to marmalade.

"If I were Ringwood I should send him back to school. Why, it can only be the other day I was tipping him at Eton," Eddy Eaton said.

"One would have thought she had children enough of her own without marrying another," responded his

wife. "Give me the paper, Victoria; I shall never believe it till I've seen it in black and white."

Miles was equally diverted. "She was always devoted to children. Told me once she would have a hundred if she could. Quite in keeping for her to marry one. What!"

"All the Avon boys are divinely handsome, and Jimmy's the handsomest," responded the duchess, ignoring his confidences. "I shall hear all about it from her sister; I'm going to lunch with her to-day."

Wellington Guest looked straight across the table at Victoria.

"'Pon my soul, there seems to be no recognized disparity in anything nowadays," he remarked, with a gleeful twinkle in his eyes.

Only Blanche and Mortimer were indifferent to the news, and had not forgotten that the carriage for the station would be round in a few minutes more. He was going to Melton with Major Royle in his motor-car, and as the Heythrops were travelling to town by the express, they would part at the Castle with not one more lingering chance of being for a moment alone.

Blanche stood in the hall buttoning her gloves, with a look about her mouth only Keppel understood. "Tears from the depth of some divine despair!" she murmured to herself, feeling sad enough. But Mrs. Eddy Eaton, all unaware of an invisible tragedy, was anxious to hear the latest account of Lord Heythrop.

"I think Miles said you had a letter, didn't he? But I could not make out what he said, and was half

afraid to ask ; people do have such very peculiar illnesses you know."

"I expect he said 'angina pectoris.' Miles has such an awful trick of running his words one into another."

But Mrs. Eddy Eaton was not much wiser, and Blanche had to further explain. At last all the various calls on her attention were attended to, and looking round the hall her eyes were immediately caught by Keppel's.

"I wish all these confounded people were cleared away. Why do they never leave us alone, Blanche ?" he said, coming towards her with a sorrowful scowl.

Blanche buttoned her last button, and Keppel, with a pang beyond speech or wrath, saw why it was she could not speak.

"Don't, Blanche, for God's sake," he cried in a strained sort of voice, longing fiercely that he might comfort her, as he of all men alone knew how.

Blanche bit her under lip. "I can't manage this button," she said with a little gasp, as she held out her hand to Keppel.

"I've brought you a book to read in the train—the one I was speaking to you about yesterday afternoon. I hope you won't mind it smelling of smoke."

Blanche seized the book eagerly ; she was always thankful for the intellectual side of their friendship.

"I love tobacco," she said, as she turned over the pages, for Keppel smoked a special brand, and the least whiff of it was sure to recall him at once.

"Write to me when you've read it, and tell me what you think ; some of the views are mighty odd, and you're

more likely to understand them than I." He pointed out the more peculiar chapters as he spoke, and then, dismissing the subject, added in another voice: "Think of me sometimes, Blanche, but not too often—I'm not worth it."

Still studying the book, she answered him at random.

"I think of you every day of my life, especially your voice. You've no idea what a pretty voice you've got, Blanche; it almost turned me crazy when I first heard it again."

The carriage wheels could be heard on the gravel outside, and the impatient horses gnawing their bits at the open door.

"We shall meet again," she began, repeating what she had said before.

"I'm sure of you now, Blanche, aren't I? It makes all the difference to me, so you may as well acknowledge the fact."

"I thought I had acknowledged it!" Blanche admitted—which was their last confidence of any sort.

A footman came up to help Mortimer into his big motor coat; and Miles, with his hat in his hand, had come to search for Blanche.

"There you are!" he cried. "Only just in time to catch the train, my dear girl! You'll come and see us, Keppel, won't you? I can give you some shooting of sorts, and a mount, if you want to hunt. We shall never catch the train, Blanche! But mind you don't forget."

The footman closed the door of the brougham with a brisk snap.

"All right, fix it up with Blanche," continued Miles, as he shouted his last injunctions to the footman in such forcible language that Blanche was obliged to interfere.

Some people live in a whirl; Miles's life was of this description, a sort of sustained tumult that swept all weaker lives into the same breathless vortex. But the uproar never affected Blanche; she looked across it now at Keppel, and laughed.

"I'll write," he responded again, at which moment the carriage started off.

"Lest we forget—lest we forget!" she repeated, and laughed to herself at the absurdity of such an idea.

The rain never ceased; the roads that had been so crisp and firm the day before were inches deep in mud, and the trees by the roadside dripped heavily on to the draggled bramble leaves in the ditch. Blanche looked out of the window at the wheels of the brougham splashing through the pools, and wondered idly if they would catch the train. It was a matter of some importance to Miles, but of no moment to her; she would as soon sit for hours at a wayside station as do anything else that morning, and only longed to be going home instead of to town. The idea of lights and champagne and crowds and voices went against all her inclinations; but Miles had to be thought of, and she must not throw him over. If she could have gone home, it would have been better; in the peace of her own fireside, with her books and flowers and personal belongings, she could have found balm to her soul; but she did not want to speak to people—not for a bit. Yet Miles must be amused, it

was only fair, and a part of the compact she quite recognized. He would have Angela, however, she was thankful for that; she would have Walter Carden, whose attentions irked her already in mere anticipation. And yet Walter was usually considered charming; but Blanche was comparing him all the time to Mortimer Keppel. She only wanted to "get away"—where to, she had as little idea as any one else, who at some one or another time frames the same impotent wish.

Miles, meanwhile, was fussing and fuming over his money affairs, and consulting hieroglyphic notes he had jotted down in a pocket-book that only seemed to confuse him further.

"In future I shall invest every penny I possess out of England; it's the only thing to do, I assure you," he declared gloomily.

"I should throw away that horrid little book, if I were you. It's never done you any good yet, and I'm sure the calculations are all wrong."

"Angela added some of them up; *they're* wrong, I expect," Miles admitted. "Rather a pretty way she has of writing figures, don't you think?" and he passed her the book. His face had begun to brighten, as he leant back in the brougham and gazed out at the dreary landscape, quite unaware it was either bleak or drear. "She cheered me up a whole lot, I can tell you," he went on, as he smoothed his moustache and reflected, like the hedonist he was, on the many joys of life. "All the same, Blanche, I shouldn't like to be married to her, even if I could."

"Wouldn't you, dear?" answered Blanche.

There was something about Miles's atrocious candour that always touched her—he took it so much for granted that she would never be jealous or tiresome, or worry him with senseless questions like the generality of women. She was leaning forward a little the better to study the disquieting entries in the pocket-book, and smiled to herself as she did so. Blanche always looked very pretty when she smiled, and Miles removed his eyes from the dripping landscape and turned to her for a bit.

"The old man still seems rather bad, don't he? What do you make of the doctor's letter? Looks a little serious, don't you think? But these doctors write so indistinctly, else their pens are always rotten. Don't tell me the symptoms," he exclaimed, as Blanche was beginning to explain; "the less one knows of illnesses the better." He removed his mind from the unpleasant theme as he spoke, and smoothed his moustache again. "A jolly nice week-end. I will say this for the Eddy Eatons—they always know exactly who to ask." Then he looked towards Blanche. "You enjoyed it too, didn't you?"

"I always enjoy Castle Loftus, and I was so glad to see Mortimer again and to hear all his news."

"So was I!" he echoed; Blanche's preference for an individual always gave him a strong bias in the same direction. "I wish now I had managed to see more of him, he's worth the whole show put together; but time flies so, and Angela and Mrs. Eddy—" Miles smiled fondly and broke off abruptly; a man could really have had no better excuse for dallying.

"How happy could I be with either!" Blanche repeated lightly.

"Mortimer thinks a lot of you, my dear; he said as much last night. And, mind you, he's not a man to be taken with every woman!" Miles hoped she properly appreciated the distinction, and Blanche laughed aloud. Miles was sometimes extremely amusing. "Keppel's a splendid fellow; he's the sort of man I would like my best sister to marry, or my very dearest friend. He's the sort of man you might well have married yourself, Blanche, if you hadn't married me. Can't for the life of me see why he doesn't marry. I take it all that palaver about a wife is only ragging, isn't it? Mind you write to him, anyway, and make him come down. I'm always telling you to ask people down, and then you go away and forget all about it."

This was perfectly untrue; but in the odd moments when he was not actually enjoying himself, Miles liked nothing better than the solace of nursing a grievance, genuine or otherwise.

"H'awful langwidge the *honorable Mileses'*, but spends his money like a lord," the tall footman observed to the coachman, as he took his place on the box-seat again after the train had left the station.

Reinforced by half a dozen newspapers, the Hon. Miles settled himself in a corner of the railway carriage, and began with great animation to compare the various notes on the astounding Kent-Avon engagement that was electrifying society that morning. "The halfpenny rags will be the spiciest," he murmured.

But Blanche bit her under lip once again. The

express train left the whirling landscape miles behind, but even so she recognized the long bare ridge with Loftus Beacon on the edge, half wrapped in a damp grey mist. She had been there only yesterday, and the afternoon had been one of the happiest in her life. A sort of fascination kept her eyes fixed on the rough outline of the Beacon till the railway embankment finally shut it out from sight. Then she opened Mortimer's book with one quick-drawn sigh.

"What does 'Stultum est timere quod vitare non potes' mean?" she asked, clinging to the generally accepted idea that all men know Latin because all men have been taught Latin.

"It means Fate," answered Miles. "I can't translate it, but that's what it means right enough."

It was the motto on the title-page of Mortimer's book.

THE HEYTHROPS' WEEK-END

FRIDAY NIGHT

We need not grieve ; we have loved too well ;
There is nothing we care to undo ;
And never a word to break love's spell
Was spoken betwixt us two.

But perhaps, perhaps, there is loss with the gain,
When lives so closely touch ;
And 'tis hardly meant in this world of pain,
That hearts should love overmuch.

AUBERON HERBERT.

THE HEYTHROPS' WEEK-END

FRIDAY NIGHT

Saffery Lodge.

THE golden sunshine of a warm summer's afternoon lay heavily on the New Forest. It was past midsummer, and a soft shade of mistiest purple, which was the bloom of the heather, had already begun to exquisitely tinge the open brakes and commons. Golden and purple and blue, the prismatic atmosphere made a dream of every spot in the landscape. To imagine other parts of the earth could be as fair was too hard a task ; to remember heaven must be fairer was beyond the conception of a mundane mind. The long road across the common gleamed like a silver streak ; some rough forest ponies and some lean-looking kine were grazing among the furze-bushes. An overheated, hatless youth on a bicycle, grey with dust and desperate with determination to achieve a record run, skimmed along the high-road, just as the Heythrops' pony-cart climbed up the hill from the station and came within sight of the open prospect.

"You can catch a sight of the Beacon from here, sir," the coachman remarked, pointing with his whip,

as they reached the brow of the common, and could see all the misty golden land that stretched away to the west.

"I've been there," answered Mortimer Keppel; "but the Castle, I suppose, lies nearer the sea?"

"Castle Loftus lies directly behind them plantations; but it's more'n fourteen mile as the crow flies."

Anything would have interested Keppel that afternoon, and the coachman, for reasons of his own, was in almost as happy a state of mind, though neither man was really following the conversation. Keppel was thinking of Blanche, and congratulating himself on having stolen a march on time by taking the early train. The express, by which the other guests were to arrive, would not be down for an hour or more, and thus he was secure from interruption for a sweet, if fleeting, space of time. To gain possession of Blanche, and get rid of every one else, was indeed the most consistent object of his life.

The thoughts of the coachman were in a different vein, though equally sweetened by self-congratulation. "I knewed it all along; I felt it in my bones," he repeated in an undertone. "I knewed the 'orse was a good 'orse." Then he made a joyful little calculation, and cracked his whip with a flourish of sudden triumph at the way the figures worked out. "But whatever would mother have a-said if it had a-bin a wrong un!" This was a sobering thought, for the amount at stake had been almost more than he could afford. His eye twinkled in anticipation, and he only longed for the supreme moment when he should draw up in the centre

of the stable-yard and shout to his audience, "Well, boys, and who's a-won the Chesterfield Cup?" He had heard the news at the station; one of the porters had let him have a look at a paper. "Any stop press news?" he had asked, and there it was before his dazzled eyes—that the horse he had so lavishly backed for shillings and pence ("mother" held the purse-strings, and pounds were beyond the wildest flutter) had won the Chesterfield Cup. The groom and the stable-boy had both backed the raging favourite who was entered for the race, and the favourite was not even placed! In any case, with the odds so short, they could never have brought off a *coup*, so the glory was all his own. To have the courage of his convictions justified is a rare satisfaction to any man; to have put up so little and to have made so much turned him quite dizzy, and made him in a different degree almost as blindly happy as Keppel.

Blanche Heythrop was sitting on a low wicker chair, on a lawn covered with pink roses, dreaming in idle happiness of life that was life indeed. A luminous light made her eyes shine, otherwise she looked calm and collected and cool, which was perhaps more than she felt, else her faculties would not have been so singularly on the alert. No most distant sound could escape her ears that afternoon, or anything distract her mind; it was useless to read—she could read any day—and she threw away her book. Like the lotus-eaters, she wished it might be always afternoon; to sit there and wait for Keppel was in itself happiness enough. Some time since she had heard the rattle of the pony-cart as it

came out from the yard, and some time afterwards the whistle of a far-away train. The time would not now be long, and she read Keppel's wire once more, "Coming by an earlier train—can you meet the 4.50?" It was like a verse of poetry, and she kissed the signature. It was Mortimer's, whether he had written it or not.

Blanche might have been in white, she might have been in pink, for all that Keppel knew. He was so glad to see her, he could take in no details, and was, besides, almost dazzled by the amazing wealth of roses. She came towards him at once, crossing the grass with all the peculiar grace of movement that was her own; yet when they met, and their spirits rushed together, as his eager eyes caught hers, for the moment they spoke only of railway lines, dust, and the prevailing heat.

"If you were to speak of inferno in that voice you would make an acceptable home of the place," Keppel said at last. He had always been strangely susceptible to the charm of Blanche's voice.

"I can't think what made you come by the slow train," she responded.

"I could tell you, if you really want to know! I should always travel by a slow train if I was sure of finding you alone at the end of the journey."

"How did you know I should be alone? It's only a chance Victoria didn't come down in the morning to avoid the heat."

"I took the chance. Luck favours the brave, you know. It's only a faint heart that submits to being overruled by circumstances; and you don't mind, do you, Blanche?"

"I don't mind a bit," she answered, as they looked at each other, and laughed from pure light-heartedness.

"You might say a little more, my darling."

"I never say much to my best friend; he should know enough to take the rest for granted."

"You should be civil to me all the same. I suppose you know I'm your guest."

She began to pour out tea then, with the complete absence of self-consciousness that was one of her rarest charms, and Keppel drew up a wicker chair and seated himself on the edge of the seat, almost afraid to more openly grasp the goods the gods were so lavishly providing.

"What have you been reading—poetry?" he asked, as he took up the book she had thrown aside.

"I've been reading nothing but your wire ever since it came. Oh, my dear, my dear, you can't think how pleased I am to see you again!"

"What's that about absence making a heart grow fonder? Do you know, Blanche, it's perfectly true! I adored you that last morning at Castle Loftus, when you stood in the hall buttoning your glove, but I've adored you even more since. It was an awful wrench leaving you like that, I was so proud you were so sorry, and so put about it was I who was making you sad—I only wanted to take you in my arms and kiss every inch of your face."

Blanche turned white, and looked over her shoulder with a scared glance.

"Don't, dear," she murmured; and she put down

the cream jug with a sudden clatter in case he should notice how her hand was trembling.

"One of these fine days, Blanche, I intend to make you kiss me again. It's the only satisfactory way of saying good-bye," he continued calmly, with the dictatorial air of a man who means to get his own way.

"Never!" said Blanche. "There's been enough of that already."

"Little enough, my dear. What makes you so absurd? You'd kiss me now if I were dying, I suppose. No one could refuse a dying man."

"But you're not dying—why should you be?" she asked a little anxiously, and her eyes grew startled again.

"I wish you'd always look like that, Blanche, Would you really mind so much?"

But Blanche made no response. "What papers have you brought down?" she asked, as she proceeded to describe the other guests who were coming for the week-end.

A great deal has been said about the artistic temperament, so much so that the phrase has become a trifle cant. The people who have it certainly live an absolutely different life to those who have it not, and Blanche, who lived intensely, was nearly always aware of the light that never was on land or sea. She was very aware of it that night as she and Mortimer crossed the rosy common and went over the edge of the moor, where they sat for awhile on a bank of heather, and deplored the fate that had kept them separate for so

long. Mortimer's life always opened up new vistas to Blanche, and under the influence of the old intimacy her serenity returned.

"Did you go to the Adrian wedding?" she asked.

"I never go to weddings, since I can't go to yours and mine! They make me think too much of all I have missed. It annoys me more than I can say to have other people, who can't care for each other as we do, casually vowing all those vows with ne'er the ghost of an obstacle to check them. I can't bear it, Blanche. I tell you the last wedding I went to it all came over me with such a mighty rush that I bowed me down and prayed, like the broken Australian poet, for an answer that might soothe my bitterness."

"I hate them too, for the same reason," she agreed.

"It's enough to make a man swear, I tell you it is, to see some paltry puppy and simpering doll coming down the aisle together, and every one making such a flutter and fuss. Just as though we wouldn't all marry if we could! What did you look like when you were married, Blanche?"

"I don't know what I looked like, and I refuse to tell you what I felt," she answered, and Keppel pleaded in vain. "But I know exactly how you would look," she continued, "and I know exactly how you would stand waiting by the altar rails."

"White flowers, and organs, and the voice that breathed—— All right, Blanche, don't make me vain. And you would come up the aisle; I know the order of the thing quite as well as you. Good God, my darling,

had counted upon with such certainty had played him false at the last minute, and left him poorer by five hundred pounds; his father, whom he had been to visit, had once more taken a new lease of life, and he had lost heavily on the Chesterfield Cup; added to which he was hot and dusty, having been nearly suffocated by the heat. Blanche's very coolness was an aggravation to a man who was so hot, and emptying out all her eau-de-Cologne to assuage the sweat of his brow, he became more than ever perturbed when, instead of cooling him, the stuff began to burn.

"Here," he cried, "give me some water. That beastly stuff's chockful of spirit. What do you keep it for? You might have told me in time."

Blanche poured out some water and gave him a sponge; she let him say what he would, no answer could have been soft enough just then to turn away his wrath.

His language was at first what is proscribed by Parliament but tacitly accepted by the majority of wives. His broker was a confounded fool, people who professed to give racing tips were little better, extravagant households could not be run for nothing—this was a hit at Blanche; he did his best to economize, but where was the good when expenses were daily increasing, and everything getting dearer year by year? Specialists and family doctors should all have their heads broke, they deliberately led people astray so that they might have the kudos of affecting a sensational cure.

"They're humbugs, the whole lot of them, and I've

more than half a mind to write to Arnold-Pryce and tell him so. And the heat," he continued—"the train was like the infernal regions! I hope you have everything iced for dinner, I have been hoping so all the way down. We had some uncommon good soup in cups at the Carlton last night; it's the proper way of taking cold soup, though I never see it done in *this* house. If it had not been for some thundering good cigarettes Royle gave me, I don't know where I should have been. Would you believe it, that chunk-headed fool lost my cigarette-case at the last moment, or said he had. I wish now I had dismissed him on the spot, it's what most men would have done. I'll be bound, too, he was smoking them himself all the way down. He's a thief, amongst other things, and I know he's a liar. And then to lose five hundred pounds! just the handy sort of sum I was wanting. Wait till I write to my brokers, I shall write them a snorter, and no mistake. Damned parsimony the whole thing, trying to save themselves a sixpenny wire. If I'd only had the message in time, I'd have pulled off the whole thing without putting my hand in my pocket, and I shall always consider they owe me five hundred pounds." He paused for a moment to gather breath. "Who is stopping in the house, and who's coming to dinner? I tell you flat I can't be civil to one or the other."

All the retorts Blanche might have made she refrained from making. It is hard to annoy the person who is happy. You may break, you may shatter the vase, if you will, but the scent of the roses will hang round it still! The stolen hour with Mortimer in the

rose garden had left an exultant peace nothing could just yet destroy. She had already ordered a cold dinner, with soup in cups, just as Miles had described, and the people coming to dinner had been asked at his special request; to tell him this, however, would have been to take the wind too completely out of his sails, and she abstained. She had always mistrusted his brokers, and had often told him so, but the present was not the time to remind him of that fact. But she had to bite her lip to prevent herself making the obvious remark that he would be late for dinner, for he would be very late, and it worried her more than a little. She only thought of Mortimer's imperial breeding and absolute self-control; he must have fought fights like other men, but she was certain he had never been engaged in a wrangle in his life. She had no sympathy with men who lost money on the turf, and did not approve of betting. Mortimer knew more about racing than any one else, and he never made a bet; yet she agreed with Miles that no one could lose five hundred pounds with equanimity, and suggested that the glorious uncertainty of racing might shortly put his balance level, which suggestion appealed to Miles more than anything else. A wounded man is best healed by his own medicaments, and his brow began to clear.

“There's something in that. I stand to win a substantial sum if Childe Harold runs true at Brighton. I'll give you a new pair of earrings if he does.”

Blanche had been promised jewellery on the same terms before without the capacity of her jewel-case

being in any way overtaxed, but she thanked him all the same. When Miles began to offer jewels, it was tantamount to sounding the retreat, and she knew his wrath was expended. She broke the news casually then that Colonel and Mrs. Arley-Smythe were coming to dinner. The colonel wished for advice about African mines, and she delicately insinuated that this was a subject on which, very justly, Miles was every one's authority.

"They are sure to be late for dinner, they have such a long way to drive," she added.

Knowing how late he already was, this was almost more than he deserved; but as he had once said himself, "Some men show amazing sense in the women they marry!" He was cooler now and pacified, Blanche Heythrop could be a most persuasive woman when she chose, and among his sweeter qualities was the virtue of never sulking, and of frankly avowing his temper to be vile. Woman is the lesser man only because she so seldom rises above the prerogatives of her womanhood.

Muttering apologies, Miles went off at length, leaving Blanche to make all the haste she had not dared make while he commanded her attention. Fastening diamonds round her neck, and lace round her shoulders, she glanced in the mirror with a sudden flush at her own radiant reflection, and seizing a handkerchief, sped downstairs to join her guests, and explain to Major Royle she must give Colonel Arley-Smythe precedence over him, as he was a local magnate, and had never dined at the house before.

Major Cyprian Royle was a natty little man, with

blue eyes and closely curling hair, and half the letters of the alphabet after his name. He received Mrs. Heythrop's explanations with a superb bow—his manners and his pluck had originally been his only asset.

"Of course I should love to take you in to dinner, it would have made me so proud," he answered with a sigh. "But I don't really mind how I go in, or where I sit; I'll go in on my head if you like. As to the table of precedence, I've forgotten the order of the thing. Soldier, sailor, tinker, tailor, isn't that how it goes?" he rattled on.

"It's not how it goes in Whittaker!" Blanche answered. "But they ought really to draw up a new table of precedence nowadays, with rich men at the top."

"They rank before V.C.'s, don't they?" replied the major, whose absorbed interest in a subject was only to be equalled by his intense gravity.

"You know Victoria?" continued Blanche.

"I have that pleasure," the major answered with another bow, "but I don't think she knows me."

"I thought you were Mr. Keppel. There is a man called Keppel I know," Victoria remarked. "I always mixed him up with you when you were both stopping with us last autumn, and we came up with all his luggage from the station this evening, so he must be in the house."

"He is," answered Blanche, quietly. It was the paramount fact in the world just then.

Major Royle, being a small man, was keenly conscious of the advantage Keppel had over him in height,

"I doubt if Keppel would relish your mistake," he answered. He himself was by no means ill-pleased.

"I don't know why he should mind," Blanche observed thoughtfully; and the major turned to her with ingenuous delight. Mortimer Keppel was a criterion with his fellows, and could have set any fashions he cared to adopt.

"We're the same age, you know, exactly the same; yet my hair is getting grey, and Keppel hasn't a grey hair in his head, has he, now?"

"It's the West Coast; it's the most deadly place you can go to. But every one respects grey hairs, and if you're really going to give up the army and go into the service out there, it will get you made governor all the sooner, see if it don't! I have never noticed anything particular about Mortimer's hair," she continued; it pleased her oddly to discuss Mortimer's appearance, "except that it wants to curl. Yours does that too, a great deal more than his."

Interested at all times in his own good looks, the major rose to his feet with alacrity, so that he might the better inspect his well-groomed head.

"A tiresome sort of arrangement, putting so many flower-vases right in front of the mirror. Do you mind if I move them, Mrs. Heythrop?" Still dodging to and fro before the mirror, he turned to Victoria. "Would you say my hair was curlier than Keppel's?" he demanded, when the entrance of the Arley-Smythes abruptly closed the subject.

Mrs. Arley-Smythe was a person of large and generous build, bedecked with all the Arley jewels.

She was also splendidly clad, and came into the room talking, as she delighted in nothing more than making a sensation, no matter how small the occasion.

"You mustn't blame me if we are late; it's all the colonel's fault. He will insist on one of the Tommies driving us instead of his own coachman, and the result is the good man thinks we are a gun-carriage, and makes his pace accordingly."

She looked round the room rather anxiously while she spoke, to see if there were any one present to whose rank she would have to yield place; then she smiled complacently, and moved a little forward, so that the half-obliterated colonel might have a chance of coming into the room.

"Everything seems to me *couleur-de-rose*. What is it?" asked Mortimer, as he took his place at the dinner-table by Blanche's side.

"Perhaps it's the roses," she suggested. The table was covered with roses, and all the candles were shaded with pink.

"Perhaps it's because I'm sitting next you, Mrs. Heythrop! Did you arrange I was to sit here on purpose, Blanche?"

"How dreadfully late you were! I thought you and Miles would never come down," she responded, while Colonel Arley-Smythe studied the menu. "Do you like the roses? I got them from the upper garden where we were sitting this evening."

Mortimer Keppel looked at her with a humorous light in his rather sad eyes.

"I thought we were sitting in the Garden of Paradise this evening."

Cooled and mollified, Miles Heythrop had now reached the stage when his martyrdom could be enjoyed. He had noticed two points in his own soup superior to the soup at the Carlton, and he had found in Mrs. Arley-Smythe a ready sympathizer in all his woes.

"And, would you believe it, my fool of a man lost my cigarette-case! I as near as anything dismissed him on the spot."

"You should be careful all the same, how you dismiss servants nowadays; they know so much, and look how they talk! I don't know how it may be with valets, but you can't dismiss your maid without risking your reputation. These sort of people always think the worst."

"I'm not afraid of my past myself," observed Miles.

"Having none!" suggested Major Royle.

But Mrs. Arley-Smythe talked on. "I often envy the colonel his military discipline; a whole garrison of Tommies are more easily managed than half a dozen domestic servants."

"My last man was a scoundrel," agreed Miles; "he always packed my sponge on top of my shirts, and wore my silk socks on Sunday when he went courting, and when I found him out he put a Prayer-book into my suit-case instead of my Racing Record by way of revenge, and swore they were both bound in leather, and he had done it by mistake. I threatened to throw my boots at his head. I wish I had now; he needed a

dressing of some sort, he was always so cock-a-hoop."

Mrs. Arley-Smythe liked Miles; she never knew what he was going to say next, and the chance of its being something unspeakable added zest to her enjoyment. Major Royle was also enjoying himself, enjoyment being his sole scheme of life—Victoria was pretty enough to please the most fastidious, and well enough informed to leave a mere man wondering where a young woman's education was supposed to end. Added to which was the sport he always experienced in Miles's company of murmuring pointed asides to his host, the double meaning of which Miles at least could always be relied on to understand. Colonel Arley-Smythe was enjoying himself too—a little less wooden than his wont, he was wondering why all hostesses were not so easy to get on with as Mrs. Heythrop. But Mortimer Keppel was the happiest man there, the knowledge of which weighed upon Blanche as her chiefest joy and most heavy despair.

"How is Lord Heythrop?" some one asked.

"Oh, don't! Please don't ask Miles about his father, unless you want him to be profane!" cried Blanche.

But Miles was not to be balked. "My father, did you say? He's all right. He's renewing his youth like the eagle, or some other unpleasant bird. He's training for a centenarian in hopes they will give him the King's Bounty, or something of the sort."

"Is that what the King's Bounty is given you for?" asked Major Royle, ingenuously. "I should

have thought a centenarian was scarcely eligible—not that I know much about such things!" He turned to Victoria, who, however, refused to enlighten him.

"You can look it up in Whittaker," she remarked dryly.

"There's a man called Arnold-Pryce, who has completely got the upper hand of my poor father. He's a specialist," continued Miles.

"I thought he was a resurrectionist!" Major Royle observed.

"He's a confounded humbug in any case, and I consider both he and the old man are defrauding the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The death-duty people were counting their chickens gaily last autumn—so were other people!—when Lord Heythrop rose like the phoenix and upset form all round. The National Debt won't be paid off this year—nor will sundry others!" he added feelingly.

The subject reminded Mrs. Arley-Smythe of her own affairs, and desiring to be informed, she broke into a string of questions that Keppel had been quite unable to answer.

"You might help me, major. You come from Africa, don't you?"

"Lagos is a little way off Kimberley. I was on the Coast myself," the major replied, with imperturbable gravity.

"What is the West Coast? And what do you go there to do?" Victoria asked.

"To take up the White Man's Burden, in the first instance; and become a district commissioner, if you've

time before you die. It's an excellent dumping-ground for failures and ne'er-do-wells, for they never come back," added the major, making light of the honours he had gained, and was gaining.

"It seems an excellent place for laurels!" said Blanche.

In cabinet photographs and on field days the major was a profusely decorated individual.

"I don't know about laurels," protested the major, who loved adroit flattery as much as any man, "but I wish they'd hurry up and give me my K. They're bound to give me a better billet then."

"I should have thought the D.S.O. would have done that," said Keppel. "I always admire the way you run your shows out there; it's the proper way of dealing with the black man, I'm sure of that."

"It's the only way, but these good folks at home are so sickly sentimental! I should like to send out a cabinet minister or two, unarmed, of course, for a little gentle palaver with his brother-cannibal—teach him a thing or two, even if he became mince-meat. In the old days we were under the Foreign Office, we're changed to the Colonial now," he explained, as he and Keppel exchanged opinions on the different modes of administration.

"Is the D.S.O. a medal or an order?" asked Victoria, who had been for some time out of the conversation.

"It's the Order of the Garter. Didn't you know that?" answered the major, fibbing freely. "That's why I never *mal y pense*, even when Miles's conversation gets a bit too thick."

"I like that," objected Miles. "They're a wild lot out there, and learn a deal of harm," he remarked confidentially to Mrs. Arley-Smythe.

"Did you ever meet a Coaster called Carteret?" some one asked.

"Cock-eye Carteret, do you mean? I know *him*," exclaimed the major, as he went into chuckles of somewhat unholy glee. "You know Cock-eye, Miles? The fellow who sang the topical song the night we all dined together."

"Cock-eye" Carteret was an agreeable reminiscence, and the major could scarcely control his excitement.

"He invented a song, you know, bringing us all in, even the chief. He's a devilish smart chap, and took us all off to a *t*.

"For language is horrid
In climes that are torrid—

that is the chorus," he cried, breaking into a verse or two. "Cock-eye's language needs to be altered a bit when you're repeating his songs to a lady. Don't be nervous, Mrs. Heythrop, I'm a nailer at bowdlerizing."

"Get on," urged Miles; "Blanche has heard a thing or two."

"They call me Soap-and-water out there."

"Odd, now, I could have sworn it was Brandy-and-soda!" exclaimed Miles.

"And the first verse is all about me and my bath," continued the major, unheeding the interruption. "I was surprised in my bath, you know, beginning of last campaign. It was in all the despatches. One of those

green canvas baths stretched on a campstool. Excuse the details, but everything has to be portable."

The verse, he explained, was lyrical in composition—

"Palmiest oil,
Dirtiest toil,
Nothing can soil
Cyprian Royle."

Then he drew himself up with a gasp. "The rest's impossible, I'm afraid, every word of it. Sorry, but you wouldn't like me to go on. Did you know my name was Cyprian?" he added.

"I always thought C stood for Charles; so many men are called Charles," Victoria answered.

Blanche was meanwhile explaining to the colonel, who liked solid conversation, the different methods of working alluvial gold and gold in the quartz; and Keppel, who was also listening, smiled to himself at the queer bits of knowledge she managed to acquire.

"How do you know everything, Blanche?" he asked in an undertone. "You don't need to go yet!" he exclaimed, as she picked up her fan and looked across at Mrs. Arley-Smythe, while he stooped to pick up the handkerchief she had dropped.

"I must," she answered briefly, but without looking in his direction. She always found it easier to deal with Mortimer when she could avoid meeting his eye.

The mass of pink roses in the drawing-room at once moved Mrs. Arley-Smythe to a glowing description of her own flowers, and how exquisitely they were always arranged by the colonel's soldier servant.

"His taste is quite wonderful, and as to his ideas—

I shall never forget the table on Mafeking Night, it was all red, white, and blue, with draped flags and two of the Queen's chocolate-boxes. He really is a treasure, and his devotion to me is quite pathetic." She paused to take breath, and then went on again. "You must come and see us, and bring your husband, Mrs. Heythrop, he would like to see our gees. We have a charming captain, and the adjutant's a dear, but I believe my favourite is the youngest sub.; he's the prettiest babe in the world, with the wickedest eyes. I'm more than half in love with him, and the colonel is more than half jealous. Husbands are ridiculously jealous, are they not?"

"It's ridiculous when they're jealous without a cause, and when there is a cause, they are often not jealous at all," agreed Blanche.

"Yes, indeed, they're ridiculous creatures altogether, though I dare say an army man has more reason to be jealous of his wife than another; and the wives of their husbands, for the matter of that! What should you do, Mrs. Heythrop, if your husband were madly in love with another woman?"

Mrs. Arley-Smythe did what she could to convey the impression that this was no hypothetical case; she loved to invest herself with mystery, and cast down her eyes to make the pose more natural.

"I should give him every opportunity of seeing the other woman, and not attempt to thwart him in any way, or ask a single question."

"Did Angela Sun Sutton give you all these photographs?" Victoria asked abruptly; she had been

he was always keenly anxious to gauge Blanche's affection.

"What could I tell him? That's the worst of it. He thinks such a lot of you, and loves having you here. If I were to say you must stop coming to the house, he would lose all patience, I know, and declare I was hysterical, and must have a course of Burgundy; and as to our friendship—why, he knows we are friends."

"Ever the best of friends, dear heart; it would take something stronger than Burgundy to quench that."

They were standing by a long window that opened to the ground. It was still and quiet in the garden, soft grey shadows hid the rose bushes, and the trees stood out densely against the pale sky. Blanche had gathered the papers and her long silk dress under her arm, and stepped out of the window to pick one solitary rose that was growing against the side of the house.

"Do you want the *Globe* or the *Pall Mall*?" Mortimer asked, as he tried to read the names of the papers in the half light. "How fast the day passes when I am with you! If we had married, Blanche, we should have lost count of time altogether."

"I wish it went slower—a week-end is only a flash," she admitted.

"You are all I want in this world, and they can give me nothing better in the next."

"You're trying your eyes, dear, I don't want *Sporting Life*," she responded; the big pink rose fell to pieces as she spoke, and the petals drifted down all over her dress.

"Aren't you coming to the billiard-room, Blanche? We're going to play snooker," Miles called out to her from inside the room.

"Not to-night, Victoria is tired. We're going to bed," she answered, as she came in from the garden.

People who abjure sentiment and never weep, may succeed in concealing their feelings, but never in cheating their woe. Blanche turned away and left Mortimer in the garden with a sudden pang that was too bitter a price to pay, even for love, and the only person who could have comforted her was the very one she daren't approach. Her will was strong, likewise her powers of concentration, but the papers she had brought up to her room she read with difficulty that night; the news was bald and unconvincing, and certain remarks of Keppel's would keep coming between her and the print. She was conscious all the time of a pain she dreaded, and shrank each time she remembered poignant moments that had gone before. She was stronger now, but the old depth was always there, and her delicate human flesh was weak: so much so, that for one moment she sobbed aloud, as she shook out the folds of her dress and a handful of pink rose leaves fluttered to the ground. She gathered the rose leaves gently in her hand just as Miles came to her door, his practical tones speedily acting as a restorative. He had come to borrow vaseline on the principle of prevention being better than cure.

"If I forget it, I know I shall cut myself when I'm shaving to-morrow; but if I have it by me, the chances are all in my favour," he explained; and while she

got it, he once more ruefully ran through the Money Market in the paper she had thrown down.

“ After all, Blanche, it's not near so bad not to *make* five hundred as it would be to *lose* five hundred ! ” he remarked finally, with some reason.

“ Not near so bad ! ” Blanche agreed, as she threw the last of the rose leaves out of the window.

SATURDAY

Was it for good?
O, these poor eyes are wet;
And yet, O, yet,
Now that we know, I would not, if I could,
Forget.

W. E. HENLEY.



SATURDAY

Saffery Lodge.

IT was Miles, with his incomparable duchess in his mind's eye, who nevertheless composed the aphorism, that professional beauties are like evening primroses, and don't show to their full glory till the lamps are lit. A woman who looked her best at breakfast was, on the other hand, the woman a man should marry—artificial women never did, being his argument. On such subjects Major Royle was also a connoisseur, and regarded Blanche with much inward approval as he helped himself to breakfast rolls. But Keppel had no theories on the subject, which was to say Blanche was his whole theory of woman synchronized.

Calmly unconscious of the mental notes her guests were making, Blanche began to read out paragraphs from the *Times*.

“I wonder what the policy of the Government is going to be?”

“I wonder what's wrong with the coffee?” interrupted Miles. “Since Pullein left you have never had a cook who could make a decent cup of coffee. Now at the Carlton——”

But Blanche had heard enough of the Carlton. “My dear Miles, this whole house is run only to please you,

and yet you're always complaining. I can't see anything wrong with the coffee myself," she cried, raising her voice with some natural impatience.

"Is that what you call the Voice that breathed o'er Eden?" Mortimer asked. "I had no idea you could speak in such a strident tone."

Miles was very pleased ; he was always glad when any one took his part against Blanche, never being very sure of his authority at any time.

"If housekeeping isn't woman's province, I should like to know what is," he grumbled.

"What is woman's province? I have often wondered," said Major Royle.

"Woman's province is a buffer state betwixt man and the servants within his gate. The valet is the only one Miles ever says a word to ; he wouldn't offend the coachman or gardeners for any money," Blanche answered, still sipping her coffee critically.

Lady Amelia and Mr. Evelyn Sloane were giving a flower show that afternoon, to which the Heythrops were bidden. Politics were to be combined with the flowers, and Miles, and any one else he could press into the service, was to close the proceedings by making a speech.

"Let me drive with you, Mrs. Heythrop," Major Royle begged. "There's lots of room on the front seat, and I promise not to crush Miss Eaton's frock. Men of my build can fit in anywhere. But Miles, now, he's just the awkward size ; and no one, no matter how they loved him, could stand Keppel on the front seat of a victoria."

"What's that about Victoria? I thought we were the best of friends!" Keppel exclaimed.

He and Victoria had been in the garden all the morning writing letters at the same table: he had helped her to refuse a proposal of marriage, to order a new dress, to spell correctly all the many words about which she was doubtful, and to write to half a dozen minor correspondents. Victoria's detrimental was easily disposed of, but the subject had necessitated a good deal of interesting discussion, and they had both come to the conclusion that the bond of marriage was a serious matter, not to be undertaken lightly or without due consideration.

"You're considering it still, I suppose?" Victoria had said.

"Since marriage is the end of life, O why should life all marriage be? I'm considering it still!" Keppel had answered, quoting somewhat at random; his wit, such as it was, being, however, totally lost on Victoria.

Major Royle proved himself a charming companion during the drive: he sang snatches of comic songs in a sad, modulated tone, he nearly fell off the front seat each time the carriage turned a corner, he buttoned Victoria's gloves, made flattering remarks on Blanche's hat, and told strangely equivocal tales, at which Mrs. Grundy herself must have laughed. He did everything, in short, except encroach on the narrow space or upset his own extremely elegant appearance, though Victoria had laughed so much she could laugh no more, and even Blanche was exhausted, by the time they reached the flower show.

They were received by Mr. Evelyn Sloane, a melancholy individual, whose life was spent in curing countless

fanciful complaints, and who took them round the show himself.

"We must," he sighed, in a resigned manner; "so much at least is expected of us."

But Blanche looked with indifferent eyes at Brobdingnagian potatoes, giant bunches of hot-house grapes, and dahlia heads thrust singly into holes in a green wooden box. "He cometh not," she said, for Mortimer and Miles were to follow in the pony cart, and the gate by which they would enter was the only thing in the flower show that really interested her. Mr. Evelyn Sloane was much too unhappy to notice her abstraction, and pointed to the potatoes with a groan.

"Concentrated indigestion! They've ruined Ireland and will ruin every other nation with dyspepsia, until people have the strength of mind to knock them off. I think myself we should eat a great deal more grass and hay and oats than we do. In diet we should be guided entirely by the wiser animals, such as horses, you know; there are very few animals have more instinct than the horse."

"Very few," agreed Blanche, wondering idly how hay could be prepared for the table.

She looked towards the entrance gate again. Miles had a habit of changing his mind at the last moment if the humour seized him to do something else; but Mortimer was different, he would come sure enough, he had said he would, and she ceased to worry.

"I don't believe Miles and Mr. Keppel are coming," exclaimed Victoria, a little later.

"They've been here for the last ten minutes,"

Blanche answered serenely ; she had noticed their arrival before any one else. The potatoes grew more interesting then, and the dahlias' heavy heads. "Have you ever tried charcoal?" she suggested to her melancholy companion. "I am not quite sure what it does, but you can get biscuits made of nothing else."

Mortimer's back was towards her; he was still standing by the entrance gate, leaning on his stick, and speaking to Lady Amelia.

"Yet I've never had appendicitis ; that's queer now, ain't it?" went on Mr. Evelyn Sloane. "I should give no prize for carrots if I had my way, nasty unwholesome things. If I were to eat a carrot"—what then would happen was beyond speech, and he relapsed into dejected silence.

Mortimer Keppel had rather a magnificent way of doing trivial things without ever being bored. As soon as he decently could he left Lady Amelia, and joining Blanche, became apparently so absorbed in the exhibits, that his intelligent interest led even Mr. Sloane back to another inspection of the tents. The primitive show could scarcely have afforded him much gratification, but courtesy and consideration for the feelings of others was too strong a habit to ever fail.

"They've taken a lot of trouble in growing all this stuff," he explained gently to Blanche, as a countryman in toil-stained raiment proudly displayed an odd lot of vegetables he had raised in his own garden.

Blanche watched how the countryman's rubicund face shone with pride.

"Palace, house, hut, pigsty, you're equally at home in them all," she observed.

think no one knows you but me. You do tell me everything, don't you?"

"I tell you more than I shall tell my wife. Poor simple creature, what should I gain by opening her eyes?"

"Poor creature, indeed! You're miles beyond that sort of woman."

"Perhaps so; but I don't agree with you all the same. If you can't marry your ideal, always marry for negative virtues, it saves a deal of worry in the long run."

Blanche shook her head. "I should like to be first myself, especially with a fastidious husband."

"So you shall. No one can come before you. If I tried to forget you ten thousand years, I should always remember how divine you looked in that hat. I never saw you in anything so pretty before."

Blanche laughed. "It ought to be pretty," she said, "if you only knew what it cost!"

The time had now arrived for the small political demonstration that usually closed the Sloanes' flower show. Whether they would or no, the house had become a stronghold of Unionism. Evelyn Sloane was chairman of the local executive, and Lady Amelia's father was at the time a Secretary of State.

"They asked me to stand, you know, but a parliamentary life would have killed me too fast, and I'm a little too young to die just yet," Mr. Evelyn Sloane remarked in his dreary way. "The meals alone, and the shocking irregularity! They all get indigestion sooner or later, that's how it is a Government that has

been long in office gets so stale. They ought to legislate about more regular meals. I should have certainly made it my speciality if I had been in the house."

Lady Amelia was tall and cold, with a very pronounced aquiline nose. She took no interest in politics, or anything else, except Persian cats, to the scientific breeding of which most of her life was devoted. She begged Blanche to sit beside her in the front row.

"Every one has been so kind about coming, and every one has promised to speak. I can't bear politics or demonstrations, especially when you have to be there; and Evelyn is no more fit to be on the platform than I am," she remarked in the same even tones. "I'm not dyspeptic myself, but I've suffered so much *from* dyspepsia that the iron has entered into my soul. I don't mean an iron tonic," she explained, with a smile. "Though Evelyn lives on them, he'll die of them soon, if he don't take care," she added.

"And do they enter into *his* soul?" suggested Miles, delicately.

"How are the cats?" Blanche asked quickly, and Lady Amelia's thin face was suddenly transformed.

"I'll take you to see them afterwards, if they only stop speaking in time. I've got the most perfect Chinchilla of my own breeding without any tabby markings at all."

"I say, I'm going to sit on the platform—they've asked me," cried Major Royle. "I'm glad I put on a dark suit—you should always wear navy blue at a political meeting; and it's lucky I put on my su  de boots—boots show up so on a platform." Surveying his small neat

feet with complacency, he pulled down his cuffs and straightened his tie, with the profound gravity the occasion required. "Lady Amelia's father will be Colonial Secretary one of these days—who knows but I may be Governor of Nigeria yet?"

"It's a pity you didn't bring a brush and comb when you were about it; I expect they'll all take off their hats," Victoria observed.

"Never thought of that! Do they, Mrs. Heythrop? I've never been to a show like this before."

"You generally take off your coat too, don't you?" Victoria continued.

But Mortimer had taken off his hat, and, the major hastily doing likewise, climbed up on the platform.

"I don't understand politics a bit; I wish you'd explain what they're speaking about," Victoria demanded.

But Mr. Evelyn Sloane, who was chairman, had risen.

"He'll sit down soon, I hope," said Lady Amelia. "How is it all men imagine they can speak?"

Blanche shifted her chair ever so little; she could now see Mortimer every time she looked up.

But Mr. Evelyn Sloane was clearly upset. He kept looking at the glass of water and tumblers that had been placed on the table, and sighing audibly. He began to scribble a note as soon as he sat down, and watched it being passed from hand to hand across the lawn with the keenest solicitude. Something was evidently wrong. Presently, however, his depression lifted, as a footman came running from the house bearing a jug with a close

silver lid. Major Royle picked it up, ostentatiously scalding himself as he did so, while Mr. Sloane tested the outside of the jug critically with his thin finger-tips. He sighed again, but this time the sigh was one of relief. Surely they might have known that he never drank cold water, and that even hot water must be at an exact temperature before he could venture to take so much as a sip.

When Miles rose to speak he was greeted with cheers. He was always expected to amuse an audience, and he generally did. He got on to the subject of the franchise, somehow, and did what he could to make the rustic voter recognize his privileges.

“A vote is an instrument of government and pledge of opinion—not my own definition, but a better man’s—and you should all of you make yourselves worthy of such a trust. You may be sure that a vote is well worth having, else how is it women are so mighty anxious to have one too? As far as that goes, the only woman I have ever met capable of having a vote is my wife, and I know very well she would prefer that it should be her husband’s.”

Every one looked at Blanche, and Victoria grew pink with excitement.

“How nice of Miles! I wish some one would begin speaking about me.”

“Nice!” echoed Blanche. “It’s anything but nice, unless you know just when he means to stop.”

But Major Royle’s was perhaps the happiest speech of all. No one quite knew what he was talking about, or what the hinterland of Nigeria had to do with a rural

constituency, but he justified his own tirade somehow, and sat down amid a very thunder of applause. The major would always be a popular hero, and had already acquired the knack of filling the *rôle*.

Reinforced by frequent gulps of hot water, Mr. Evelyn Sloane stood up to return thanks. Major Royle had been a brilliant success, and he could not make enough of the kind friends who had brought him hither. He never became more involved than when he knew exactly what it was he wanted to say. He halted and stammered so much that Blanche gave up listening at last—the more so that Victoria was nudging her elbow to make her observe Major Royle's emerald-green socks. The major's knees were crossed, and Victoria was lost in admiration of his ankles and feet.

On the platform they still continued to propose and to second the votes of thanks ; and, catching Mortimer's eye, Blanche wondered why he should look at her with such an equivocal smile. It must have been something in the speeches she had missed, and she asked him about it in the dining-room, when all the party were having tea—all except their host and hostess, that is to say ; for Lady Amelia, having collected from the tea-table as many jugs of cream as she could find, had gone off to feed her Persian cats.

“ Poor dears ! they're not to be tempted unless with the very richest cream,” she explained, as she left her guests to look after themselves.

Mr. Evelyn Sloane was meanwhile partaking of some liquid patent food in a corner of the room, and could speak to no one while so engaged.

"I meant to ask you, what was it you were laughing at as you came off the platform?" Blanche exclaimed, as Keppel offered her the drainings of a cream-jug.

He looked towards his host in the corner of the room, and smiled again.

But Miles interrupted him. "Blanche, Blanche!" he cried, "I hope you're proud of your son! Did you hear what Sloane said when he was returning thanks? 'If there had not been a Mr. Miles Heythrop and a Mrs. Heythrop, there would have been no Major Royle.'"

Miles always spoke at the top of his voice. So long as the person he was addressing heard what he had to say, the people who might overhear never entered into his calculations.

Mr. Evelyn Sloane, who had been thus overlooked, stopped stirring his patent food.

"Oh, I say, did I say that?" he gasped, while a faint tinge of what might once have been colour overspread his cadaverous face.

Mr. and Mrs. Eddy Eaton motored over to dinner that night, and all through the first course every one discussed which of the many devious country roads was the best route to come by. Riding to hounds had made them familiar with most of the lanes and byways, and they all took a keen cross-country interest in the matter.

"That reminds me," said Miles. "A horrid fiasco, the Chesterfield Cup! Did you think for a moment Rolcall would have made all the running the way he did?"

"All the Ashley people were backing him, I hear now. No stable secrets are better preserved," responded Eddy Eaton, gloomily, having also suffered.

"Who is the owner?" some one asked; while Miles went on to unnecessarily explain that he did not bet in marbles.

"I know the man Rollcall belongs to," said Mrs. Eddy Eaton. "He never backs his horses, he never bets at all, so one can never tell what his horses are going to do. Beatrice seems to be the only person who had ever heard of Rollcall, but she put it all down to the ground."

"The form must have been wrong somehow. I put all my money on Childe Harold; he's a rare stayer, or was, till yesterday," Miles remarked, while still continuing to comment on the astute stables that sheltered Rollcall.

The size and disposition of the party had once more placed Mortimer close to Blanche, and under cover of the racing conversation he began to discuss her appearance.

"I am very ignorant about dress. I often wonder afterwards what sort of colour you were wearing."

"I never imagined those were the sort of things you thought of."

"So long as anything has to do with you, I think of it. I've begun to think of the income tax before this, and ending by thinking of you; the connection comes of itself whether I will or no. It was just the same out in Africa, I used to dream of you every night, and you always said the same thing in the same voice."

"What was it I said?"

"Perhaps you may never come back.' And then you put your hand on my arm, and I kissed you, Blanche. It was a dream I loved to dream again and again."

"Do be quiet, Mortimer; don't speak about your dreams—not just now!" and Blanche hastily passed him the menu, so that she might shut out the vision that would arise of Mortimer, in a travel-stained uniform, stretched by a bivouac fire, smiling even in his heavy sleep.

It might have surprised that dinner-table of fairly quick-witted folk not a little, could they have overheard the impassioned trivialities passing between their calm, contained hostess and the self-sufficient Mortimer Keppel, who was so polite to every woman and so indifferent to them all.

But Eddy Eaton had begun the famous story of the Sunsuttons and the telephone, which was just then going the rounds, though new to the party at Saffery Lodge.

"It seems Sunsutton wanted to speak to Angela from the club, so rang her up by telephone. 'Are you there?' he said—you know how the thing works. 'Oh, is that you, darlin'. I thought I knew your voice!' she answered in her sweetest tone. And Sunsutton flew into an awful fury. 'My name is not darlin', and it's very evident you don't know my voice. I tell you I'm your husband!' he shouted."

"And what did Angela say?" every one inquired.

"Trust Angela, she's enough mother-wit for a much

worse fix ! " answered Eddy Eaton. " ' I know it's you, dear ; didn't I say I knew your voice ? ' she called back, perjuring herself, no doubt. But what on earth could Sunsutton say ? though every one knows the terms they have been on since the beginning of the season."

" That's the worst of telephones ! " remarked Mrs. Eddy Eaton.

" It's the worst of speaking politely to your husband ! " echoed Blanche.

" How is it conjugal affection always seems to make people so suspicious ? I can't think why ! " said Major Royle, with the blandest expression of innocence on his face.

" I say, I wonder who she thought she was talking to ? " exclaimed Miles ; it was the part of the story that interested him most, and beginning to grow suspicious, he looked somewhat jealously all round the table.

" So whether it is a story with a moral or a story without any morals, no one knows ! " concluded Eddy Eaton, whose piece of pretty gossip had received as much acclamation as any raconteur could well desire.

All through the summer every one who came to Saffery Lodge spoke about the pink roses.

" I never saw such a shade of pink, " said Mrs. Eddy Eaton, as she entered the drawing-room ; " they are exactly like a bunch I bought at a hat shop in Sloane Street. We have nothing like them at the Castle, though we have gardeners enough, I am sure. But Mackenzie thinks of nothing but the yew hedges, and all the under-gardeners are engaged to the maid-servants, so *they* don't do much ; and Eddy refuses to

interfere, because he says good servants are impossible to find."

"Our gardener is a widower; I don't know if that makes any difference," remarked Blanche.

But Mrs. Eddy Eaton had other things than gardeners to discuss.

"There is always so much I want to say to you, and always so little time for saying it. When we do meet we are always surrounded by tiresome men—not that I mean anything against the men, it would be even more tiresome if they weren't there, and I would sooner dine with Miles and Major Royle than any other men in town. I dare say they don't mean a word they say, but then, who ever supposed they did? So long as they amuse you all the time, what does it matter?" She broke off for a minute to admire the roses again; they were arranged in long loose sprays, and the heavy heads scented the entire room. Then she caught sight of a photograph on one of the tables. "It's Sybil, isn't it? Pass it me, Victoria. She certainly is wonderfully good-looking. Have you, by any chance, heard the truth of the latest developments? There was a meeting of trustees last week, and Eddy was there. They say she has gone to Ireland, which seems singularly ill-judged under the circumstances, but Sybil never had any judgment. *Can you explain her conduct? I own it's beyond me.*"

But whatever details Blanche might know, she was never anxious to discuss the lamentable events that had given Sybil Eaton's branch of the family so much that was scandalous to talk about.

"Perhaps she was in love; it seems the only explanation."

The point appeared to Mrs. Eddy Eaton worth considering.

"Were you ever in love? That is—I should say—you're married I know! Not that it follows by any means—one might have married Miles for many reasons. I myself have been passionately in love, but it was not with Eddy, though we have always been the best of friends, and I often wonder now how I could get on without him; and I will say that the way he helped me with my dressmaker's bill was really noble. 'I suppose a woman must dress,' was all he said—it was such a sensible remark to make all of his own accord! The bill was really outrageous too, and it's not as if Eddy were a millionaire." Then she returned to her starting-point. "Were you ever in love? I forget what you said."

"Yes," answered Blanche, simply; only primal subjects interested Mrs. Eddy Eaton, and no question or answer was ever too straightforward for her.

"Well, when you are in love, whether you can marry the man or not, it doesn't make a bit of difference, you like to be always meeting and having him about. That's the way with a woman, I know, and I suppose it's the same with a man, else they wouldn't be always turning up."

"The world is made for men," Blanche responded in a meditative way; "they can do what they like."

"Yet I don't believe it's really love, half of it isn't. I don't believe I really understand love myself, not the sort of love some people seem to feel. Do you?"

"I understand one kind; it seems to me real enough."

Mrs. Eddy Eaton gazed at Blanche with genuine interest; for all her own experience of life, she had a dim idea there was something in the world she had never yet tested.

"What is it? Can't you explain?" she asked.

"In one way it's sympathy and perfect confidence, telling everything and having everything told to you—and yet it's a good deal more."

"I've never confided in Eddy; he's not that sort of man at all."

"It's understanding each other absolutely, and being understood."

"It must be lovely to have a husband who understands you!"

"I would rather be understood than anything else, it is so killing to have to explain," agreed Blanche.

"Husbands are so selfish, that is what so quickly stops love. They are so taken up with themselves and their own concerns, and all they demand is a wife who understands them; as to understanding *her*, how many of them think of that?"

"All men are not selfish, and they understand more than you would think—at least some men do."

"In that case you may be quite sure some clever woman has educated them and taken no end of trouble."

But Blanche would not agree; she thought too much of one man to think any man wholly bad.

"No doubt but marriage demands a whole host of undreamt-of qualities, but men are every bit as equal to the strain as women," she persisted.

"You must be unselfish and have a lot of heart for that sort of love, my dear. Now, I'm intensely selfish, and all I really want is a lot of money. All the same, I wish I knew how you get the beautiful sort of devotion some people seem to feel. It must be an art, and yet how could you acquire it? What is love?—can't you tell me that?" she asked again.

"If you are in love everything is different, and ordinary things are nicer for the time. But I can't explain it; I don't think any one could."

"I don't understand that one little bit! Why should ordinary things be nicer? It's not sense, you know."

But nothing could dim the ideal that still dwelt at the back of Blanche's mind.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton could not make it out at all. "It surprises me to hear any one talk like that, and still believe in things, who has been married to"—she was going to have said, "to Miles Heythrop," but checked herself just in time—"who has been married as long as you have," she said instead. "I can only suppose that love of your sort is not for every one," she added.

"That's true," said Blanche; "perhaps it's not."

"I'm not even sure that I should altogether like it. It must be worrying, and so uncomfortable, unless everything went all right; and, of course, it never does that."

"Whatever the price, I would rather pay it than not understand."

"That's because you've got some depth in your

character. I'm not a bit like that; but if my character is shallow, it's not so shallow as Eddy's!"

This was some consolation, and reminded Mrs. Eddy Eaton of a subject on which she could hold her own with any one.

"I know something about husbands, I will say that, and the longer you live with one the more you see what you gain by studying his follies. I don't believe in letting your husband think he can get on without you, you know; so long as they always turn to you it's all right; but once let them think they can manage by themselves, and your influence is gone. Often I have not wanted to go to places with Eddy, and been sorely tempted, when he asked me, to say he could get on all right alone; but so long as he thinks he can't, I never shall. The rule mayn't apply to you, for Miles depends on you implicitly as it is, but it applies to most husbands."

Mrs. Eddy looked narrowly at Blanche once more: when a woman ran down husbands it generally meant she was reflecting on her own; when she upheld them, the thesis was presumably the same. Miles Heythrop was a charming individual, more particularly as a friend, but he was not the sort of man one would associate with ideals. Mrs. Eddy had no knowledge of vicarious living. Her own views of life were founded on things that had happened directly to herself; so far her knowledge was irrefutable, but she could not imagine how another person's brain could grasp anything beyond.

"When I believe in things I find it very hard not to

But Miles was determined to finish his story, more than usually pleased with himself for having discovered something that promised even to scandalize Mrs. Eddy Eaton.

"Mrs. Heythrop," he cried, pointing to Major Royle, "kindly oblige me by not asking that person to the house again." Then he turned to Mrs. Eddy. "Finally she burst into tears, while he swore like a trooper, and all the family jewels were scattered about the room. But he kicked the fellow out of the house, sure enough, for I met him in St. James's Street next morning limping like a three-legged screw."

"What's the score?" asked Blanche, from the corner of the room, and Keppel came to help her.

"I have scarcely seen you, Blanche. To-morrow is Sunday, do you know; and then comes the deluge, or something quite as blank."

Blanche's hands were clasped on the long cue she was holding; she looked pitifully at Mortimer's set face. She was sorrier for him than she was for herself.

"Poor Mortimer! I wish I could make you enjoy your visit more!"

"I wish you weren't such a good hostess. I wish you would neglect all your other guests and attend only to one. He would appreciate it, I can assure you."

"But I must look after the others, else they would think me so rude; and I always take it for granted that you will understand."

"All very well, Blanche, yet here we are, the only two people in the room who do understand or know anything about love, and you expect me to be contented

with crumbs ! I think you most unkind, and many other things."

" And I think nothing but good of you ! It isn't fair to find fault with me so."

" It isn't fair to look at me like that, not with such adorable eyes—and expect me to keep cool. I could scandalize the room as easily as Miles, if I chose."

" You forget how I remember every word you ever say, and how you upset me when you speak like this."

" And now I have made you cry ! I can't bear that, you know I can't. What makes you so sensitive, Blanche ? What have I said ?"

Blanche sighed. " It's very easy to be cruel to a sensitive person, even without meaning it. Not that you could ever be, dear ; I wasn't thinking of you."

But whom she might be thinking of roused a sudden fury in Mortimer. He knew her so well that he never hurt her feelings, but how was it possible for any other man on earth to know her as well as he ? The problem brought no pleasant thoughts.

" It's a pity I couldn't always have stood 'twixt you and the world, Blanche. I would have been so careful."

" What did you say the score was, Blanche ?" Miles cried, having finished his story ; and Blanche turned obediently to the slate.

" Give me some chalk, dear, I can't reach it," she said to Mortimer.



SUNDAY

We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye :
But in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband and my bride,
Love that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth ! . . .

Love that had robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave.

GEORGE MEREDITH.

SUNDAY

Saffery Lodge.

BLANCHE lay back on a low garden-chair; she was supremely blessed. The unutterable peace of Sunday in midsummer lay on all the hot landscape: trees upon trees, with here an open brake, and there another leafy undulation, and in the shimmering distance far away a soft pale blue ridge of rising forest land. She had lived enough, and perhaps suffered enough, to have mastered the art of living for a while in the present. It would all come back, doubtless, the blankness and pain; but for the mean time she was secure, and a look of absolute content gave a more intense expression to every feature of her face. She settled her cushions more luxuriously, and looked at the long blue ridge on the horizon, and devoutly pitied all those that morning who could have no conception of her own ease of mind. And Mortimer was quite as happy as she—he was almost like a boy when he was with her; and she silenced such scruples as would arise by trying to convince herself their friendship was on a different plane to the ordinary friendships of other people; for everything seemed fair that morning, even to expecting rather too much of human nature.

Miles and Major Royle lounged in the shade of some trees on the other side of the lawn, smoking many cigarettes, and discussing with what energy they could the best method of growing cotton in Nigeria. Mortimer Keppel, who contrived to remain cool and stiff, in spite of the heat, sat by an open window, writing letters that could not be delayed; gravely oblivious of all around him, apparently at least, yet never for one moment unconscious of the fact that just within his line of vision Blanche was sitting by the rose bushes on the lawn. The night before, Mrs. Eddy Eaton had made some sweeping assertions about propinquity and love.

"I suppose the real reason I feel happy is because Mortimer is writing there close at hand," Blanche reasoned idly with herself.

"You believe in marriage, don't you, Blanche?" Victoria asked, breaking in on the drowsy peace; she had flung herself into a low chair, and, like Blanche, was gazing at the sunny landscape, though, unlike Blanche, she could not for long subsist on that alone.

Blanche loved her own thoughts, and put aside her ruminations with a sigh. Mrs. Eddy Eaton had begged her to do what she could to influence Victoria towards Lord Inchgarvie; the alliance was much to be desired, and Victoria still refused to make up her mind.

"I think so, my dear, but, of course, not with every man."

"Would you believe in it if you were me? I'm thinking of Inchgarvie."

"I wonder why you think of any one else!"

"How did you know I was thinking of some one else?"

“ You are, aren’t you ? ”

And Victoria nodded her head ; she had enough sense to realize that there was no good indulging in small mysteries with Blanche.

“ Didn’t you loathe being engaged ? I know I shall. Beatrice says I should kick over the traces and disobey the fifth commandment flat, it’s the one about parents, you know. She says nothing would induce her to marry Inchgarvie, and I don’t believe anything would.”

“ She’s ignorant still, and very young ; one changes one’s mind so, especially about marriage.”

“ Did you change your mind ? ”

“ Indeed I did.”

“ And has it saved you from a lot of mistakes ? ”

But this was such a difficult question, that Blanche was obliged to change the subject.

“ It’s rather a mistake to throw over a man when it may be only for a whim. It’s very easy to fancy you are in love when you are not. I’ve done it myself before this.”

“ I wish one could give away men to some people, and take them away from others,” Victoria responded, with a petulant frown.

“ You should never give away your own man ; I always think that is the height of meanness ! ”

“ I don’t care if I am mean, they are much meaner. I don’t believe men ever marry the women they ought to marry. They go and lose their money like fools, or else they haven’t any, which is every bit as foolish ; and yet Inchgarvie’s money aggravates me more than anything else. If only he hadn’t got it, I should not need to think of him twice.”

"Don't you think one forgets about the other man in time?" Blanche asked. "After a bit you would all be as happy as if you had married the right ones—if your husband is nice, that is to say, and there were lots of distractions?"

She looked across the lawn to the library windows as she spoke, and wondered what distractions would be strong enough to make the presence of Mortimer Keppel void! But rules that applied to herself and him were by no means for other people.

"That's just what I don't know—does a husband make you forget every other man?"

"I spoke of distractions as well," Blanche answered rather hastily. "Just look what you would be able to do."

"I'm rather sick of distractions, I think; this last week has been exactly like all the others. We went to the Opera, which I hate; when you don't know a word they are singing, and there's no particular tune, it's really rather flat. We went to a wedding in the afternoon, and drove down to Hurlingham, and we dined at Claridge's, and supped somewhere else, and at every one of those places there was Inchgarvie glued to my side."

"And I'm afraid I did my best to continue that part of the entertainment! I asked him down here for the week-end, but he couldn't come. 'Urgent private reasons prevented him,' he said."

"Just as well, perhaps! We're not on speaking terms at present; didn't you know? He has gone to Scotland; but what his ridiculous reason for going may be, I can't tell you."

Blanche looked beyond the garden at all the miles of forest land, but she knew Victoria by her side saw neither leaf nor tree. Love's young dream seemed such a hard, prosaic affair—it was difficult to find where the romance came in at all. Calculating, heartless, and selfish—she felt a sudden distaste for the sorry burlesque of it all.

"He had no right to go to Scotland," Victoria continued; she was evidently nursing a grievance. "That was what I complained of. He had promised to drive me down to Henley in his car. We were to have lunched with Welcome's sister, and all have gone on the river together, and then at the last minute he comes and says he must put it off."

"Didn't he explain?" asked Blanche. It seemed to her a pitiful thing to be so captious and flippant, and to think so little of affection and what it was really worth.

"I wouldn't let him explain. He began some story in his silly disconnected way, but I never even listened, for I cut him short and told him straight that if he preferred going to Scotland to taking me to Henley, he could! He got quite cross then, but he wouldn't speak for ages, I expect he was counting seven or something; so I said as many disagreeable things as I could, to fill up the pause. He must have an awful temper, but he didn't dare to show it; he only walked about the room, with his face getting quite white, and there were tears in his eyes too! He said something about me being unsympathetic, and the question was not one of *preferring* to go to Scotland. 'What is it, then?' I said. But he only got huffy and refused to explain. 'I'm sorry

and devoted to other people. I hate being as silly as every one else."

"But you're not, my dear; and you're a great deal prettier."

"Am I?" Victoria asked. "Being admired only makes me vain; no one has ever liked me for myself, I know that. Of course, I do love society," she added, "and I don't really mind going to the Opera, but one needn't give up that to have the other thing, and I should like both."

"Why, there are tears in your eyes too; you're as bad as Inchgarvie!" said Blanche.

Victoria smiled. "I wonder what he was crying for. I wish now I had not been such a brute," she observed reflectively.

Blanche suggested that as far as that went, it was not yet too late.

"I don't really believe I'm good enough for him. You'll think me very contradictory, but though I can't stand Inchgarvie, there's something about him, somehow, that makes the silly things he does rather nice—you feel they're rather nice, I mean, even if they're silly. Mr. Keppel has got just the same way, only nothing he does is ever silly, of course; and yet I'm not in love with Mr. Keppel."

"How strange!" responded Blanche.

At all times it seemed to her the strangest thing in the world that there should be people who could look upon Mortimer with absolutely dispassionate eyes. But Victoria and her woes had genuinely interested her.

"If you really want to understand love, you are

quite sure to one day, and you're more likely to learn it from Inchgarvie. Welcome is far too gay a dog. I should cultivate your character, if I were you, it always gives you something to go upon. The more I live, the more I think one should try to take an intelligent interest in outside things, like the country, and books, and sport, and not depend too much on people; even one's dearest friend is liable to come short, or forget, or, in any case, to go away. Not a husband, of course; but I think you said you were never going to marry?"

Blanche spoke with the least little touch of sarcasm, and Victoria began to change her mind; she had no wish for Blanche Heythrop to think her a fool.

"Does every one forget and go away?" she asked rather forlornly.

"Oh no," said Blanche, with a good deal of feeling; she herself knew one who would never, never change! But the gospel was far too hard to explain to a pretty spoilt child.

"I am sorry I could not hear what you two were saying," said Mortimer; he had finished his last letter, and, crossing the lawn, dropped into a garden-chair by Blanche's side.

"We've been speaking about marriage," she explained.

"I wish you'd speak to me about marriage, I'm really very ignorant. Of course, I know all about a wife's duties, every man does, but I never quite know what you expect of a husband."

"Common politeness," answered Blanche, "one should never demand too much."

Mortimer Keppel swore quietly to himself at intervals all through that warm, sunny afternoon.

"I know, dear," Blanche whispered, when he expostulated. "I would like to kill every one too, so that you and I might be left in peace among the ruins! Wait till after tea," she added; while he murmured to himself that he certainly would kill some one if it went on much longer.

But Miles was very anxious for his company, and Major Royle insisted he should play croquet, and though Victoria, who was his partner, had been an angel from heaven, she could not have appeased the impatience in his heart.

"Tea in less than no time; general conversation, which I loathe, when Blanche is there; a walk over the brake, with the family close behind, and we have lost the day!" he kept calculating bitterly to himself—playing the wrong ball in his abstraction, and paying so little attention to Victoria's remarks, that she asked him at last if he had got toothache?

"Toothache? more likely it's the heartache. No one knows what we poor bachelors endure," he answered so seriously, that Victoria laughed aloud at the excellent joke.

"It's a horrid complaint, I can tell you, Blanche," he persisted.

Major Royle and Victoria had gone to dispute about a ball on the other side of the lawn.

"Only when the other person doesn't care!"

"And how do I know she does care?"

"Because she does," Blanche answered soothingly.

"If you've any sense, you'll knock my ball out of position ; there's no good putting me through the hoop, you know."

Keppel surveyed the balls doubtfully. "I should hate to give you a beating, my love," he observed, as he slightly raised his eyebrows and looked at his adversary with a quizzical expression.

Suddenly the voice of Miles, loud and vehement, broke in on the afternoon stillness. He was beside himself with indignation, so much was evident ; and each remark made by the footman, to whom he was speaking, only served to increase his wrath.

"It sounds as though he meant murder. Come, Mortimer, and see what it is," cried Blanche, who always interfered when Miles went beyond a certain limit.

"Never posted the most important letter of all the batch. He couldn't have selected more carefully if he had done the thing on purpose ! Everything depends on it's being delivered in town first post to-morrow morning, and Mr. bloomin' Wellwood goes off with every letter but this. Like his confounded stupidity. Why they ever went and abolished slaves, I can't think ! They were ever so much better a class than these idiots ; you paid them nothing, too, and beat them within an inch of their life if you pleased. I've a jolly good mind to sack the whole lot, from Wellwood down."

Henry had retired with what speed he could the moment Blanche appeared ; the missis was more able to cope with the "Honorable 'Eythrop" than he, and Miles accordingly began to explain.

Saffery Lodge was some way from the post town,

and the local box, at which letters from the Lodge were always posted, must have been cleared an hour ago, when Wellwood had gone, taking with him all the letters but this. To send over to Copley Green, the only alternative to giving the matter up, was a difficult business so late in the evening, because of the distance; besides which the coachman was gone for the day, and the groom could not be spared.

"All the gardeners have gone to church. Let me go, dear; I should love to," Blanche exclaimed, quite breathlessly.

"Where is Copley Green? Can't I go," added Mortimer; they were both of them quite as excited as Miles.

"I would go myself, but I can't. Sloane is coming here this evening on purpose to see me about some mines, and I must be at home. I'm in the thing myself, and it's all most important. I can't spare the groom either, for Sloane's going to ride, and I promised him to have the horse looked after."

"All right," said Blanche, "order the pony-cart. There's just time, if I start at once."

"Take Mortimer, then. You must, Blanche, I won't hear of you going alone; it will take you two hours to drive to Copley Green and back. Why on earth any fool ever buried a post-office in such an un-get-at-able corner, I can't imagine. I shall write to the Postmaster General this evening, see if I don't, and tell him how awkward it is having the latest post-box so far away. I've complained about it down here till I'm black in the face. As to Wellwood, I tell you,

Blanche, both his parents must have been reared in Bedlam."

"I don't know where they were reared. And don't find fault with Wellwood—promise me you won't."

But Miles was all contrition and gratitude. "I've got a devil of a temper, my dear, and no mistake. I only hope you didn't hear all I said. It's very good of you and Keppel, and I'm very much obliged to you both. There was nothing else you wanted to do, was there? But, you see, if I miss this mail it may upset the whole apple-cart."

He waited about till they started, and helped Blanche into the cart, and promised not to forget her when he became a richer man; and he thought of nothing but African mines till they came back.

If Blanche and Mortimer had lived their lives for that one hour, it could not have been said that they had lived in vain.

Crossing the common, they turned off the highway by a grassy track, and plunged into the warm depth of the Forest, where golden shadows were lying heavy on all the forest trees.

"The gods are sometimes kind!" said Mortimer, as he pushed his hat off his forehead.

"It wasn't the gods!" Blanche put her hand lightly on his arm, and laughed. "It wasn't even Wellwood. I hid the letter myself, and everything turned out just as I hoped."

"Oh, I say, Blanche, did you want to drive with me as much as that?"

She nodded. "You're going to-morrow, and no one knows when we shall meet again."

"I loathe convention as much as you," Blanche responded a little hurriedly; "I loathe everything that is narrow and mean. Honour isn't, and it should be as strong as love, I am sure it should. It's easier for you to talk, dearest; but it's rather base of me. You know how you'd feel yourself, if you had bound yourself by a promise."

Mortimer sighed. "I only know that, when I'm loving you like a brother—and I'm not loving you that way to-night!—I sometimes wonder if they altogether realized when they made the world what an unconscionable power love would become. Surely they would have made some permanent provision for marriage in the next world if they had."

"Perhaps they have. I can't see how it is to stop."

"Or where it is to stop!" he suggested. "What is your religion, Blanche? I wish you would tell me."

"To be happy one's self, and to make what other people one can happy also. It embraces more than you would think."

"So long as it embraces me, I never heard a sounder creed."

But Blanche drew back. "Not just now—no, dearest, don't! How can I drive if you go on like this? Happiness is our birthright," she continued, as she straightened herself; "it's a Divine right, anyway, and makes you more fit for life than anything else does."

"Very true, I'm sure; but why are you sitting on the splash-board? It almost looks as if you were trying to keep me at a distance."

Blanche laughed, and shifted her seat. "I can't trust you, dear; that's what it is."

"You'll never be able to trust a man if you're always mistrusting him, never."

"That's true," she agreed. "To know you are trusted implicitly is much more likely to keep you straight."

"Do you mean me when you say *you*?" he asked, wondering a little at the profound inflection in her voice.

"I was thinking of myself and Miles," she answered. The only thing in the world Miles Heythrop really believed in was his wife.

"All very well, my darlin'; but, if I don't have you now, when shall I?"

"Put on your hat; it'll fall off if you push it much further back. I never saw such a beautifully shaped nose," she added, half to herself.

Mortimer laughed. "Much the same as most people's noses, isn't it?"

"Not at all the same! But I want to speak to you seriously," she continued.

"Good heavens! Do you think I've been joking all this time? Here, you're taking the wrong turning. Look at the sign-post, three miles to Copley Green. I wish it was Gretna Green we were going to, instead of this Copley place!"

"Have you got Miles's letter? I suppose you know he stands to win £1000?"

"And you went out of your way to risk the whole sum!"

Blanche maintained that it hadn't been a risk, she had intended to drive to Copley Green all along.

"I thought you'd like to see some of the Forest scenery."

"Thanks, Mrs. Heythrop, I'm very much obliged. I never knew a kinder hostess. What do you want to speak to me seriously about? I'm waiting for you to begin."

"You ought to be married, Mortimer; you're one of the marrying sort, and you would be ever so much happier if you were."

"Don't speak such drivel, Blanche; I loathe the idea of a dull mediocre wife." She tried to interrupt him, but he only shook his head. "They'd all be dull to me, deadly dull. It's like your kindness to try and think of something to make up, but nothing ever can."

"You ought to marry for the sake of your family."

"I've got no family, I tell you; I'm the lone lorn one."

"All the more reason you should marry and found one then. Do you never think of Charlton Dammarel, and what is due to the place? You should be married and settled down in it by now, like other men. We're all getting on, and you are older than I."

"Can't quite see myself founding the Keppel family —what! Fancy having children with brown eyes or green, when I only wanted them to have eyes exactly like yours!"

The quizzical expression on Mortimer's face was irresistible, and Blanche laughed lightly, but stopped as suddenly. The idea of Mortimer's children gave her an odd turn.

"Men love so easily," she began once more.

"I loved too easily when I first met you to ever love again. Do you remember, Blanche, it was at old Heythrop's, and I was late for tea?"

"I've been remembering it ever since. When did you notice me?" she asked.

"I noticed you so instantly, it must have been the moment I came into the room. But it was your voice I really noticed first—no other voice was ever half so sweet; then old Heythrop brought me up. But you had looked at me before that, Blanche; you looked me straight in the face with the divinest stare in the world, and I lost my heart for good and all."

"I was so glad when you came and sat by the tea-table. Do you remember how bold I was? I asked for your photograph before we had talked five minutes. I said Miles wanted it for his smoking-room, and was so annoyed that it had not been sent."

"And I went straight to the photographer's shop when I left the house, and got taken then and there."

"It never went into the smoking-room," she remarked quietly, as they both lingered over the charm of recalling those early days when the veil was still between.

But Blanche clung to her main point. "I can't quite think of any one just now, but there must be another woman."

"She could never love me as you do, and she would be certain to hate you, they always do. I can see her sneer of a Sunday afternoon when I left her to go over to Saffery Lodge."

"How horrid and dull for her! What would she meantime be doing?"

Mortimer raised his arched eyebrows. "Doing? Oh, she would be founding the family, I suppose. However that might be, I should be sitting in one of those rose-coloured chairs in your boudoir, pouring out my woes, and kissing the hem of your garment."

"Indeed you should be doing nothing of the kind!" Blanche protested.

"How bold you are, my darling; of course, I would rather kiss your face! But imagine going home again and being questioned by an irate woman who imagined she had the right! What would it be to her whether I had kissed you or not? And you may be sure she would ask me if I had. You know well enough why I don't marry, Blanche: it would be impossible, dear. To be in love with you is enough to put one against every other woman in England."

He spoke sadly and so simply, it was more a pang than a thrill that Blanche experienced, as she listened to his words; she was too sad to feel proud, yet too proud to be absolutely sorry.

"Then all I have done is to have spoilt your life, and kept you from being the best husband in the world to some other most fortunate woman. I'm really very sorry," she said, looking at him with most piteous eyes.

Whatever rules Blanche laid down, Keppel always abandoned them all the instant she showed any sign of distress; he could never bear to see a woman cry, and when the woman was Blanche every motive of prudence was forgotten. He leant towards her now. To do so was involuntary, but not to kiss the hem of her garment; that was for cooler moments.

"I can't help it," he declared, as he pressed his lips to her face; "you should never have cried."

"I've stopped crying—indeed I have," she told him; but he held her for a moment longer.

A brother might have held her in just the same way, Blanche thought; and yet it was so far from brotherly that her heart misgave her, and she released herself with what speed she could, protesting gently that he was only making their friendship more difficult for her.

"Don't say that, when I value your friendship more than anything I possess. I should never have been satisfied with any one's love but yours. The terms of our friendship are what make me so proud. You could not have trusted any other man, and you trust me as if I were your brother. It isn't your fault or mine that we met too late. We are neither of us children, and even if we could pretend that we were nothing to each other, it would be idle to do so. We were never meant to kill an instinct so strong as that." Then he spoke a little lower, and looked at her with intent eyes. "That's not the sort of love that spoils a man's life. It was like your pluck to let me know you cared—a coward never would; but half the affection was mine, and you knew it was only fair. I can't help thinking of you always, Blanche; I don't ever try to help it! You are my dearest thought; and I tell you, if I had died at the Front, as so many men did, I should have blessed your name with my last breath."

Blanche turned away her head; for a minute neither of them spoke.

"Blanche, darling, would you really like me to marry?" Keppel asked at length.

"I should loathe it, dearest, more than I can say!" she answered, with a break in her voice that for the moment left her speechless. "Take the reins for a minute; I want to pick some of that scented fern!" she cried, conscious that much more emotion would be more than either of them could stand just then.

Every foolish thing was a pleasure that night, and the drive to Copley Green was one they never forgot.

"Here we are—this is the place," Blanche said, as they came at length to a forest clearing that was covered with little green hillocks and flooded with level sunshine.

Behind the scattered village a steep moor climbed up to the trees again, a flock of white geese came down by the edge of a gravel-pit, while a round pond in the corner reflected the picture all over again. A girl in a pink sun-bonnet looked timidly over one of the garden gates, and a queer old person stooping over some beehives in another garden pulled his forelock; otherwise Copley Green evinced no interest whatever as Blanche pulled up the pony and looked around.

"I always think I should like to live here for a bit; it reminds me of a fairy tale."

"Or a honeymoon," suggested Keppel, who could never stop joking. "We might come here for our honeymoon, Blanche. What do you say?"

Blanche shook her head. "But I can never make out who writes the letters, or why in the world they should put a post-box here."

"Perhaps the little goose-girl writes to the pelican in the wilderness," said Keppel, as the girl in the sun-bonnet fled shyly at their approach.

"I shall come here one day when you are gone, and live in one of those charming cottages, and explore the Forest, and try and forget there ever was such a man. I should like it immensely. I know I should."

"I doubt if any one here would understand how to cater for the most fastidious woman in England. That old fossil, for instance, looks to me as if his father had been an oak tree and his mother a badger."

"He looks as if his clothes withered in autumn," agreed Blanche, as she smiled at the ancient forester, who stared at them as though at strangers from another world, and then turned back to his beehives again, with the deliberate preoccupation of a vegetating mind.

"Next collection at 7.30; we are in plenty of time," said Keppel, as he pushed aside a tangle of fuchsia and rose tree, and slipped Miles's letter into the antiquated post-box that was let into the gable-end of the cottage.

Try as she would afterwards, Blanche could never remember just what it was they talked about on the way home. She remembered saying she loved the Forest more than any other part of the world, and Mortimer asking if there were many red deer about. Beyond that, the long drive was only a blissful memory of talking on and on, and driving deeper and deeper into the Forest, till the overhanging branches almost brushed their faces, and Keppel had again and again to put out his arm and draw her aside, so that Blanche was almost sorry to come out on the open track again.

It seemed as though the sun would never set that night; the light was dazzling still as they drove across

Saffery Brake, while Saffery Lodge was almost hidden in a rosy mist.

"What's that?" cried Keppel, as they turned in at the gate. "An owl? Owls are supposed to be birds of ill omen to our race."

"It's a hen, a Dorking hen; where can it have come from?" answered Blanche.

"Watch out there; the hens have got loose!" shouted Major Royle at the same moment, as he came towards them flourishing a green watering-pot.

But before he had time to explain, a flustered hen, with outspread wings and outstretched neck, appeared on the lawn, and, vaulting nimbly over a flower-bed, he went off again in hot pursuit. Miles, who had also joined the chase, though not with such energy, was in among the sweet peas, throwing handy missiles in every direction, and issuing orders between whiles to the footman and groom, who were both enjoying the fun.

"What the deuce is it?" cried Keppel, jumping from the pony-cart and instinctively joining the sport, to be almost tripped up by an angry barn-door fowl that ran out from under the wheels of the cart.

"Here, Sims, beat up that covert, and don't stand grinning like an owl," Miles shouted to the man from the stables, who plunged obediently into a thicket of rhododendrons.

"Oh, Miles, do be quiet!" cried Blanche; "you'll hustle all the poor creatures into fifty fits if you shout like that."

She besought him to open the side door and let them into the lane, and implored Major Royle to have mercy on a small terrified bantam cock.

"All right, Mrs. Heythrop, there's a nice lot heading this way if you'll kindly keep them off the rose bushes. Whatever I am, I'm not a hen, Miles!" he added, ducking just in time to escape some of the stones Miles was flinging about.

Blanche turned to the footman then, and calling to him severely, told him to stop breaking the rhododendrons, and asked why he should be carrying about a handful of silver forks.

The tall footman, who had for the moment lost all his fine reserve, tried somewhat ineffectually to draw himself together, and explained he had been laying the dinner-table when they called him away.

"Best lay down those forks; Mr. Heythrop wouldn't like it, you know," Major Royle observed confidentially. "This is his show, not mine," he explained rather hastily to Blanche.

"Indeed it's not," cried Victoria. "It was all your fault from beginning to end. You said it would be good for the hens to have a run."

"I said that back yard was the very place for a hen-run—quite a different thing! And I never knew the garden gate was open."

"Stop that row, will you, Henry," exclaimed Miles, who was himself making more noise than any one else.

"Let him alone; he's doing his best," answered Major Royle.

He knew he had made an easy conquest of Henry and the lad from the stables, having a way of his own with subordinates, so that he could always command his men. The Hausas and Kroo boys had been devoted

to him in just the same way, and it flattered his vanity to see how quickly he could make his personality felt.

Henry retired upon the cucumber frames, to be shortly joined by the groom.

"'E's just about a nice gentleman, 'e is," remarked the lad. They liked the way he treated them, with as much goodwill as command, and Henry proceeded to describe a photograph of the major he had seen in the smoking-room, "with medals a-stretching from one to t'other shoulder." He was not prepared to say but that they went round to the back too !

"Quiet now—steady, and we'll cop the whole lot. Bear to the left, Miles, and don't let them through the asparagus," Keppel commanded.

"Now then, Chick-a-biddy. Ware wire you infernal fool!" added Major Royle, as the flustered, frightened brood was at length driven through the side gate.

Miles took up one last stone, a sharp flint, and sent it spinning with all his force in the direction of the gate. Blanche gave a sudden cry, and Keppel turned back with all his heart in his eyes.

"My darling, what is it?" he cried. He quite forgot to hide how frightened he was and how much he cared.

"It's nothing," said Blanche; but her face was as white as a sheet.

"We shall all be late for dinner," shouted Miles from the doorstep. He had flung the stone without thinking, and never guessing there was any one behind the slender screen of tendrils and leaves, had already gone into the house.

"Are you going to faint?" Keppel asked.

"I hope not," said Blanche; "but I'd better sit down. How silly you are!" she added, and she smiled at his frightened expression.

But that Blanche should be hurt seemed to Keppel unspeakable, and he could scarcely take his eyes off her face.

"It's only my wrist. I wish you'd tie it up," she said a little faintly.

And Keppel knelt down on one knee and took her hand gently in his.

Then she wished she had not asked him; his touch made her heart beat so fast.

"Your colour is coming back," he said.

"I'm not faint now," she answered, for all her faintness had gone. "You'll spoil your handkerchief," she continued, trying hard to be practical.

"So many things have been spoilt in my life, that don't much matter."

"I'll have it washed," Blanche persisted, ignoring his misery.

"How fine your skin is; why, it's bruised already! And what a ridiculously slender wrist," he murmured.

"It's stronger than you would think."

Mortimer Keppel sighed. "You're altogether stronger than any one would think."

"That's just as well," she answered.

"Perhaps," he agreed doubtfully; "but women ought to be weak."

He knotted the handkerchief skilfully round her wrist, and Blanche looked away.

"I'm glad you were by; no one else could have done it half so well," she said with a little gasp.

He looked at her anxiously. "Promise me to take some brandy the minute you get into the house. I'll send some up myself."

"Miles has some in a flask in his dressing-room," she answered a little cruelly.

And Keppel got up from the ground and straightened himself.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, folding his arms and staring rather reproachfully at her face.

Blanche shook her head. "Physical things are so much easier than mental."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Blanche looked up at him for a moment with a sudden flash in her eyes.

"I'm rather glad Major Royle let the hens out," she answered enigmatically.

Revealing an unexpected talent, Major Royle took to strumming plaintive little airs on the piano after dinner that night. He sang most seriously the oddest ditties to the plaintive airs, till his audience scarcely knew whether they were meant to laugh or cry.

"Do you know the 'Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò' ? it always affects me so that I can scarcely sing, but I'll do my best," he observed with a sigh.

Two old chairs and half a candle,
One old jug without a handle ;
These were all his worldly goods,
In the middle of the woods.

"He was a younger son, I take it, but most awfully in love," he explained, as he gently played an accompaniment in the saddest minor key.

The piteousness of the ridiculous tale somehow appealed to Blanche.

"The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò' was such a gentleman," she observed.

"I am tired of living singly; if you'll come and be my wife, quite serene would be my life," Keppel responded softly, quoting the words of the song.

Major Royle still sang on, gazing down at the piano with his prominent eyes, as though amazed that the notes should produce so much melody.

"Lady Jingly answered sadly,
And her tears began to flow,
'Your proposal comes too late,
Mr. Yonghy-Bonghy-Bò'!
I would be your wife most gladly!'
(Here she twirled her fingers madly)
'But in England I've a mate!
Yes! you've asked me far too late.'"

But Mortimer listened no longer to the pathetic story that still went on and on.

"You have such pretty brown hair, Blanche, but you don't look very strong. No one would ever believe you had such a lot of pluck."

He was sitting in a low chair so close to her side that he spoke without raising his voice, and Blanche put her hand up to her hair and smiled at his personal remarks.

"But I'm not plucky; I'm really an arrant coward, if you but knew."

"You've got such grit, my dear girl, that if you were in trouble you could keep it all to yourself and never complain. You wouldn't whine or cry out as other

MONDAY MORNING

Saffery Lodge.

VICTORIA'S maid came to the door while Blanche was dressing next morning, to ask if she could come for a minute to Miss Eaton's room.

"Is she ill?" Blanche asked; but the maid did not think so.

Victoria was sitting by the dressing-table with a cloud of yellow hair all round her shoulders.

"How good of you to come! Do you mind? I was so afraid of meeting people. Major Royle seems to spend all his time walking up and down the passages."

"I met him as I came along, and he called out at once, 'If you don't look at me, I won't look at you.' So I told him I was clothed and in my right mind—he'll be late for breakfast unless he hurries up. But what is it, Victoria? Is anything wrong?"

Victoria, pouting and frowning, pushed a letter towards her.

"Do read that and tell me what you think," she answered, as she watched Blanche's face.

The letter was from Lord Inchgarvie, and Blanche drew a chair up to the dressing-table.

"Inchgarvie Castle, N.B.

"MY DEAR VICTORIA,

"I am afraid I must have seemed very rude when I left you so suddenly last Thursday, but I was too miserable to explain. I should not bother you now—I don't suppose my affairs can interest you—but I had just had a wire to say Kirstie, my dear old nurse, was dying, and I could think of nothing else. I got up just in time. She knew I would come, but the doctor told them she would not die till I came. These old Highland servants have such kind hearts ; I can't tell you how glad I was I had not come too late. I sat with her all evening and held my darling's hand to the end. Forgive me being very foolish, but an old friend like that is as dear as one's own flesh and blood. Mortimer Keppel knew her ; he has a shooting at Easter Garvie, and often stopped at her cottage for tea. You will think me a driveller, but I'm not self-sufficient like some men, and I should have loved to have you for my friend. She is to be buried on the island, close beside the family ; the funeral will be very simple, and she will be rowed over only by men of the clan. I can think of nothing but Kirstie, so will stop now, as I know you get so easily bored.

"Yours very sincerely,

"INCHGARVIE."

He had scrawled yet another sentence at the foot of the page, and Blanche, who did not often cry, read it with tears in her eyes.

"I told her about you, and how pretty you were. I

thought you would not mind, for it made her die so happy."

"Poor Inchgarvie!" exclaimed Blanche. "Oh, Victoria, how blind you are! You said yesterday you did not understand what love was; don't you understand it now?"

She read the letter over again as she spoke, more especially the part mentioning Mortimer Keppel. She liked the way Lord Inchgarvie had brought him in, feeling sure Mortimer would justify any one's choice of friends.

"I don't know what to do," Victoria objected. "It would be an odd thing if I began to like Inchgarvie after all."

Every one appeared to be going to sea that morning. It was Cowes Week, and most of them were going over to the island.

"Very civil of the old man to ask us, Blanche; he's usually such a dog in the manger about the yacht; but he might have given us a bit longer notice," said Miles, as he tossed a letter across the breakfast-table to his wife.

"He's never missed asking us for Cowes Week since we've been married, and never asked us till the very last minute yet," Blanche observed dryly.

"Hates having anything taken for granted, I suppose. Lots of parents are like that," said Major Royle.

"What's all that about meeting us at Totton? I can never read his writing. Why the deuce can't we join the yacht at Southampton?" continued Miles.

"He wants us to come on by the slow train. Then we can't take the express; what a nuisance!" exclaimed Blanche, still trying to decipher her father-in-law's handwriting.

"Confound my blessed father! there's no necessity for him to meet us at all; but that's the old man all over. He has patience for nothing—he'd have been dead long ago if he'd only had a little patience—and the run out to Totton will just fill up his time."

"I'm going to Scotland," said Keppel; "that's to say, if I can get to town in time to catch the lunch train from St. Pancras."

"We're all going on Christopher Cobb's new yacht; it's as big as a liner, Eddy says," Victoria remarked.

"You are, are you?" cried Major Royle. "I'll wave to you, then. My boat's the *Skim Milk*."

"It doesn't sound much in your line."

"She's not a liner, if you mean that! I wanted them to call her the *Cocktail*, but my sister said it sounded profane. The boat's theirs, not mine, you know."

"Train's due to arrive at 11.15, sir," said the butler, at Miles's elbow.

"Hold on, Wellwood; wait a bit. Is the major to take a dock ticket, or get out at the West Station? And wouldn't Mr. Keppel be better to go north from Euston?"

"Depends where the yacht is a-layin', sir," Wellwood replied.

"Any more tender questions we could ask Wellwood?" Major Royle asked softly, as Wellwood did what he could to preserve an inflexible countenance.

"I say, Royle, why can't you come on with us? We

shan't be much behind the express, and I'd like you to meet my father. You might sell him your car; he has a scheme of buying up all he can to keep them from frightening his carriage horses."

"I feel a bit nervous about your dear father; I'm naturally a very timid man."

Blanche smiled. "Then you are never your natural self! As to my father-in-law, you'll find him a lamb; he only shows his claws in the bosom of his family. Shall you be a nice party in the *Skim Milk*? I forget who are to be there."

"That depends," said Major Royle, "whether you are a mother or a single man. My sister has dozens of children, mostly flabby, dabby infants who yell. There's a medium in all things, and I told my sister so."

"What did she say?" Blanche asked.

"She said I was heartless, and didn't understand a mother's feelings. You can't argue with a woman who says she's a mother, it always makes me shy."

"I hope I shall get on all right with my dear father?" Miles remarked, a little apprehensively. "You'll have to keep the peace, Blanche."

"I wish I had a wife like that," sighed Major Royle. "I'm good enough at fighting, but I'm no good at making it up."

"Why don't you marry?" Blanche suggested.

"Ask Keppel, he's more reason than I. He ought to have been married long ago."

"Why don't you, Mortimer?" said Blanche. To hesitate for a moment would have been fatal, but even so, she felt her colour rise.

"I should require just the same sort of wife as Royle wants, and Miles seems to have cut us both out," Mortimer replied with courtly gravity; and Blanche breathed freely again, while Miles looked across the table at his wife with the complacent air of a man who has got what every one else wants.

Blanche had many things to think of that morning, and the countless questions and objections Miles raised at every turn, only served to confuse her further.

"I don't believe you're thinking of what I'm saying," Miles exclaimed at last.

"Indeed I am," cried Blanche, who was thinking only of Mortimer Keppel.

It was a most lovely morning, with sleepy clouds on the horizon, deep blue sky up above, and dazzling sunshine everywhere.

"I wish you wouldn't go away!" she said weakly, as Mortimer came over to her from the booking-office.

"Come with me to Scotland," he answered recklessly.

Major Royle, arrayed in a faultless yachting costume, was peering at his reflection in one of the waiting-room windows.

"Looks smarter tipped a bit to the side," he murmured, as he shifted his cap. "Here, Miss Eaton, mind you don't forget to wave; I shall be very much hurt if you don't; and I hope you'll remember me next time we meet."

But Keppel had drawn Victoria aside, and was speaking to her earnestly, as he leant on his stick further down the platform.

"I shall see Inchgarvie to-morrow. I've had a letter from him, and he's awfully cut up about the death of a poor old friend. But perhaps you know?"

Victoria nodded rather uncomfortably; she was always a little afraid of Mortimer Keppel.

"You will forgive me, I know, but I was wondering if you would like to send him a message. He said he would drive down to Garvie and meet me at the station."

"I don't know what to send in the least; it's bad enough to speak, but it's much worse sending messages. And I don't want to be rushed into matrimony, and it isn't fair of every one to worry me so. I'm sure you think me a fool; but I really can't help it, if you do."

"I think much too highly of Inchgarvie to want him to marry a fool. As a matter of fact, I want him to marry you, and was wondering if you knew what an uncommonly good sort he is."

"You all seem bent on cracking him up; Blanche is just the same. I can't think why some one doesn't go to him and tell him things about me for a change."

"I shall tell him lots of things about you to-morrow; he will want to listen to nothing else."

"I suppose it must be all right, if you and Blanche say so. You know more about marriage than I do; but you wouldn't marry yourself, unless you were in love, would you now?"

"Aren't you in love? I always made sure you were!"

Victoria blushed crimson, which annoyed her extremely; she always felt so childishly young when she spoke to Keppel.

"But if you were in love, then I suppose you would marry?" she persisted, having got a little confused.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mortimer, with a deep sigh, "I should have thought I was past that sort of thing."

"I don't believe it," Victoria answered.

Mortimer bowed. "I don't believe it either," he answered. Then he asked her again if she had any message to send.

"What are the things you will tell Lord Inchgarvie—about me, I mean?" she asked, in a manner that was intended to be off-hand.

"Victoria looked charming in pale blue, and sent you her dear love—that's about what I shall say."

"Oh, but what a story!" she exclaimed; "I haven't had a single blue dress this season. You'd better be more careful what you say; Lord Inchgarvie knows more about my frocks than you do, and I shan't send my love in any case. I shall send no message at all."

"That's very unkind," said Keppel, severely.

But Victoria was unfastening a tiny diamond heart that hung on a little chain round her neck.

"You can give him this," she said, as indifferently as she could.

"Yes?" answered Keppel, ignoring her confusion, as he held the little trinket on the palm of his hand.

"And tell him to bury it right over Kirstie's grave on the island—he will understand." She turned away abruptly, and Mortimer put the trinket in his pocket.

"My dear," cried Miles, "have you remembered everything? You know what my memory is."

Blanche was carrying a large bouquet of pink roses. "I seem to have remembered nothing but these; I thought your father would like some."

"Aren't those the roses Angela made such a fuss about? I wish you'd give me some for her; she'll be with the Eatons, you know," Miles explained; and Blanche obediently halved her bouquet.

"Here's a lot about the running of Childe Harold," cried Major Royle, joining them with a bundle of sporting papers under his arm.

Miles was immediately engrossed with the latest racing intelligence, and Blanche and Mortimer, both praying the express might be late, walked far down to the quiet end of the long platform.

"I asked you just now not to go away, but I've changed my mind; I think it would be better if you did go—for a time at least, then it would be easier perhaps."

"What would be easier?"

"I don't want to see your face or hear your voice; it would be easier if I didn't."

"I'd shoot myself dead to oblige you, but I can't live if we're never to meet."

Blanche bit her under lip. "I wish I could forget you, dear."

"It would break my heart if you did; you're the whole of earth to me and all heaven."

"If I only liked your voice, or only liked you for your looks, it would be different."

"Why not say *love*, dearest? I hate people who like me."

Castle Loftus people would be in the Pullman, he knew Miles and Major Royle would rush to speak, and trusted to Blanche remaining behind, and it had all fallen out just as he wished.

"Thanks, Mrs. Heythrop, for a charming visit; I can't tell you how I've enjoyed myself. I wish you'd give me a rose. I shall never see pink roses without thinking of you."

"Shall you think of me when you are in Scotland?" she asked absently, as she rearranged the roses in her hand.

"I shall think of you in the hat you wore at the Sloanes' party, but I shall think of you oftenest kissing me in the wood."

"How can you get up so much interest in an old married woman?"

"Who you are or what you are is all one to me—I take no interest in any one else."

"I'm glad you were able to come," she responded, looking at anything but his face.

"We shall meet again at Charlton." Then he leant a little further out of the window. "By Jove, Blanche, what a good time we shall have! Let us arrange to meet in town the Thursday before, and I'll take you for a walk in the Park. It will be winter, and early dark, but we'll walk right on till the lamps come out. Heavens, dear love, how we shall talk!"

"Just time to say good-bye," cried Miles, rejoining them unexpectedly. "We shall have a topping time at Cowes, Blanche; Angela is to be in the Cobb's yacht all the week."

Then the train moved away, and Blanche caught a last glimpse of Mortimer's grave, sorrowful face. She could have cried aloud, but she began rearranging the roses instead, while Miles explained how pleased and delighted Angela had been with the flowers.

"She thought it so good of me to remember it was pink roses she liked; and of course I did not tell her they were really yours."

"Of course not!" agreed Blanche.

But she loathed the pink roses just then; she would much rather they had been dead leaves blowing about the wintry park. But winter seemed a lifetime away, and still further the dusky afternoon when she and Mortimer were once more to meet again.

"Angela is all in white; we shall see her at the Squadron Gardens this evening," continued Miles; he was much too full of his own exuberance to notice any want of response about Blanche.

While Major Royle, who was more than half in love with Victoria, was equally occupied with his own state of mind, and only longed to get rid of Miles so that he might confide in Blanche. He would like at least to ask her if she thought he had any chance. Not that it really signified, but Victoria was a devilish pretty girl and no mistake.

MORTIMER KEPPEL'S WEEK-END

FRIDAY NIGHT

For the strife of Love's the abysmal strife,
And the Word of Love is the Word of Life.

And they that go with the Word unsaid,
Though they seem of the living, are damned and dead.

W. E. HENLEY.

"I wish I had seen Keppel yesterday when he called. Where did he take you to?"

"We went across the Park right up to the Kensington end."

"I never can understand that craze for walking—Keppel's quite as bad about it as you. What was he saying—any news?"

"He said I was the only person he had ever met who had time to go for a walk in London, and he told me he had seen you at the Sunsets."

"Angela always declares she can't get on with Mortimer—never knows what to say. I wonder why that should be? She ripples on for ever when she's talking to me," Miles replied, rather proud of the fact.

"I never find any difficulty," Blanche said, smiling to herself absently.

"He's not very easy to know intimately—that's about what it is. I doubt if I should ever have known him so well as I do if you had not been so friendly also. I am glad you're going to help him through; he told me there was no other woman he would have cared to ask."

The choice reflected credit on himself, Miles thought—he was glad no other man's wife had been asked to assist the fastidious Keppel; but Blanche was a little upset, and anxious to divert his mind.

"Let me put your tie straight," she said. "Why don't you always wear black-and-white ties? They are much the most becoming, I think."

"Do you?" Miles answered, trying to peep into the small mirror in the hansom. "Confound the thing!"

he exclaimed, as just at that instant they turned into a dark subway.

"Out of the shadow of night the world rolls into light," Blanche murmured to herself; but Miles continued to fume—

"And what a ridiculous approach to one of the most important stations! Why can't they build on the level, and not give these poor beasts such a gradient at the very end of the course?"

"Did you hear what Welcome did the other day when he missed the train? He took a special. He says he always does it when he loses a train to reassure his creditors."

"They say he's in Queer Street," Miles answered, as he sprang out and began shouting aloud for a porter.

The station was crowded with the usual crowd of hurried, flustered folk, and noisy with the usual din and uproar of a great terminus; everything was dull and drab and grey, but for the signal boards and the great green engines; a heavy veil of blackened mist only serving to make the scene more sombre. But the place might have been Paradise and the bustling throng a cloud of angels to Blanche as she hastened along; she looked everywhere for Keppel, and halfway up the platform recognized him at last—a tall thin man in a long overcoat, gazing at the people with cold, pre-occupied eyes, till suddenly they met her own. Keppel had always said there was a peculiar charm about Blanche's smile; he said it to himself again, as she came towards him with an ineffable light in her eyes.

the soup ! Do come here, Miles, I want to ask you a hundred things," she cried.

She made a charming picture as she leant out of the carriage window, with sables up to her shapely chin, and a hat like a huge pink rhododendron blossom resting on her beautiful hair. Miles Heythrop did not need to be bidden twice.

Only a moment before Major Royle had gone to help Mrs. Eddy Eaton fix her window—it would not open and she wanted air. The carriage was therefore full, and when the guard blew his whistle there was no time to make any alteration.

"Where are you, Blanche ? I thought you were here," cried Miles, fearful he might yet have to forfeit his seat.

"All right, stop where you are," answered Mortimer ; "we can find room in the next carriage."

He helped Blanche in as he spoke, and springing in after her, took his place in the opposite corner, trying to conceal what a great fire such a small matter could kindle. Blanche leant back breathlessly against the cushions as the train slipped out of the noisy station. She drew her furs around her and looked out of the carriage window at all the blackened house-tops and all the chimneys and smoke ; the light that never was, made even this dreary prospect radiant, and she saw only soft silvery shadows, melting before long into a rosy mist as they quickly gained the open country.

They were not alone, the train was crowded, and the three other occupants of the carriage stared for a moment at the new-comers. It was most foolish to wait till the last moment before getting into a train—most

foolish ! the old man with his back to the engine thought to himself, only wishing he could state his disapproval openly. The short-sighted lady, who was working out accounts on a small slip of paper on the back of her purse, also looked up for a moment—man and wife, she concluded in somewhat short-sighted fashion. Only the schoolboy, who was reading detective stories in a paper-covered book, showed any intelligence, and he wondered, as he glanced at Blanche, if all women smiled at all men as she smiled at Keppel—revolving which question, he glanced at her again, wishing, as he did so, he were many years older. But at different stations these three left the train, and Blanche and Mortimer were at length alone.

“ How fast we are going ! ” she said.

“ The quickest part of the journey is from Basingstoke—it’s all downhill from there,” he responded. Neither of them quite knew what they were saying.

When the train stopped at Basingstoke Miles hurried up with much compunction and all the evening papers.

“ So sorry, Blanche ; I never noticed I had left you on the platform. The station was so crowded, and Angela put everything else out of my head.”

Miles was not an imaginative man and never traced an effect back to a cause. As he stood on the platform chatting to his wife, he supposed her eyes must be the same as usual, and that she always had that pretty pink colour in her face ; it was so pretty that he felt for a moment half inclined to desert the cheery party next door and go on instead with Blanche and Keppel, and

he wondered he had not noticed it before. Blanche could never have interested him in the way she did if he had comprehended her; he would quickly have despised a woman he had been able to read like a book. He thought of Angela and Mrs. Eddy, and once more congratulated himself he had married Blanche; a woman like Blanche was worth hundreds of the others—to have as a permanency in a man's house leastways. If his feeling had been only love, he would have tired of her long ago; but the wife who still interests her husband can have little to fear. He looked at her again, then he reflected, with the impartiality of a second thought, that his wife may be had any day of a man's life; whereas a friend, like Angela the divine, must of necessity be only an interlude.

"Too old at forty!" Blanche read out from one of the papers. "What a funny idea! We had all best enjoy ourselves while we can, then."

"One needs a lot of pleasure in one's life," Miles responded gravely. "No need to squander it, all the same," he added, as, determining to be economical when he could, he left his wife and returned hastily to the duchess.

"How young I feel!" said Mortimer. "They fill those papers with humbug."

"You're not half so young as you look. How is it your hair never grows grey?"

"I have no wife to hustle my life, and I don't put on flesh; those are the things that age a man."

"They haven't aged Miles."

"Ah, but Miles's wife is a woman in a thousand!"

Men who look young are always happily married: didn't you know that?"

Blanche pondered for a moment. "And what about a woman?"

"A woman who is in love never grows old."

She laughed lightly. "What blank lives most women must lead! I know so many who look more than their age!"

"Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not——'" But Blanche prevented him going further. "I'm only quoting, there's no harm in that; and it's quite true, you haven't changed an atom since the first day I saw you—you must be in love, my dear."

"My views have changed a lot, I know they have."

"You have now learnt that a friendship betwixt a man and a woman is the very spice of life; having likewise taught yourself, for you never learnt it from me, that you can't run away with every man you love."

"The man I love would never ask me to."

"I'm not so sure of that. The woman tempted me and we did run! Can't say what I might do with a little encouragement. If I weren't your friend, and if you hadn't married Miles, I believe you would have been a downright prude."

"I am glad to hear you say so," Blanche answered dryly. "Running away with one man because you've had too much of another, always seems to me a case of out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"Depends entirely whether the fire is going out or only just lit—some fires burn for ever."

Blanche shook her head. "Very much wiser, then, to keep the frying-pan between!"

"You'll never get an old flame to agree to that. You're material-minded, Blanche, that's what it is."

"I adore comforts, if you mean that; all my tastes are expensive, they always were."

"So are mine," he agreed; "we really suit one another admirably." Then he changed his tone. "You never tell me much about your life, you leave me to guess it all."

"It's a very ordinary life, but in many ways it's exactly the one I would choose."

"You expect so little—most people demand so much; and you never ask for more."

This aspect had never occurred to Blanche, and she looked out of the window for a minute.

"I expect daily bread, and I certainly believe in happiness," she began slowly.

"Go on; I should like to hear your confession of faith."

"I don't mean passive happiness either, though I believe in that too. Have you ever felt that you could be happier than you have ever been, and in quite a different way?"

Mortimer thought of his lonely hearth, then he looked across at Blanche.

"Much happier," he answered briefly.

"Well, that's the sort of happiness very few people ever experience. Very few people can feel it, and if they do, it never lasts long, something is sure to bring it to an end."

"Don't at all see the force of that! You're getting morbid, dear, or else you're over-tired. Depend upon it, we walked too much yesterday, but the Park seemed so easy after the moors, I forgot how far we had gone."

Blanche sighed. "I often think we've gone too far, but it is so difficult to lay down rules."

"We might have taken a hansom," he said, still worrying about his want of thought.

Blanche burst out laughing; Mortimer's methods were always so straightforward.

But the time was getting short and there was much to say.

"I want to ask your advice," he began—he always asked her advice about everything. "Would you advise me to put the servants at Charlton on board wages, even when I am in the house? I believe it saves a deal of trouble."

He also wanted to know if he should buy the *Times*' "History of the War," and how Inchgarvie would get on with that pretty little fool? Did she mind him smoking? And would she tell him if Angela was on terms with the head of the ducal house? He had something to tell her about Sybil Eaton he thought she ought to know, and as he explained, she noted again, as she had often done before, what a delicate way he had of discussing delicate matters. He had all his plans for the future to unfold, and on much of the past they were both ready enough to dwell. No train goes so fast as the train that might well linger, and Blanche began to count the landmarks with a jealous eye.

The afternoon was heavy and grey; winter was not

yet over, and spring had not yet begun to transform the earth ; but the Glastonbury thorn that flowers at Christmas was never more rosy-red than the bare trees and hedges seemed to Blanche's happy eyes, and certain parts of the country became so identified with their conversation that she never passed them again without thinking of Keppel. He was speaking about the way she smiled as they passed the clump of yew trees in the hedge ; he was discussing old flames when they sped along the high embankment with the old water-mill down below. Further on they came to the sweeping downs that would be corn-fields in the autumn, and where the day-labourers, toiling in the distance, looked no larger than pygmies.

" This land was all put under cultivation at the time of the Crimea," said Blanche, as an item likely to divert Mortimer's mind from a too close investigation of her private life.

" That hill on the horizon stands just outside Salisbury ; you would never think it lay in that direction, would you ? " he responded, with a passing twinkle in his serious eyes.

They both grew silent, however, as they came to the last tunnel ; in a few more moments the salt air was coming in at the open window, and the train stopped at Southampton.

" I believe the tide is always out here ! " exclaimed Blanche, as she stood up.

" There's the Japanese warship. Can you see her lights ? " answered Keppel, proceeding to help her out.

The evening was clear, and the air deliciously soft.

Long black shadows lay on the empty harbour, with pools of water gleaming every here and there. Blanche took a long breath and looked round for Victoria.

Released from the thraldom of a long *tête-à-tête* journey, Victoria shook herself free from Lord Inchgarvie at last; leaving him to collect all her belongings, she sprang on to the platform and met Keppel.

"Oh, Mr. Keppel, why did you choose such a slow train? I thought the journey would never end," she cried.

"That's odd now," he answered; "you're the only person who found out it was the slow train!"

"The others were enjoying themselves, I dare say; it's more than I was doing."

"Tut, tut! you engaged people beat me. Here's Mrs. Heythrop; she'll tell you how to be happy though married, I am sure," and Mortimer hastened on.

"No one can be happy who is married against their will, and you'll never teach me that, Blanche. Did the journey seem long to you? I thought that beastly train would never stop, and Sandie has got on my nerves."

Blanche took her arm and drew her gently along the platform, while Alexander Edward Garvie, Earl of Inchgarvie and Baron Tillicoultry, tenderly packed his *fiancée's* dressing-case, kissing each article separately before he put it in.

"Mortimer fixed the trains; I don't know why he didn't choose the express," said Blanche.

"People are so selfish; I don't suppose he ever thought how dull it would be for me. First, I said I wanted to read Eddy's speech in the House last night; but Sandie

knows I can't read speeches, so he saw through that. Then I said I was tired and wanted to go to sleep; but he kept fussing and worrying so, I soon found it was less trouble to keep awake. How long does a man go on being in love—after he is married, I mean? I wish you'd tell me that, Blanche."

"I'll ask Miles; he will be sure to know."

But Victoria would listen to nothing. "You're not the least sorry for me, you know you're not; you are all most unsympathetic, every one of you."

"I'm not unsympathetic, and I'm awfully sorry for every one; do let me comfort you," exclaimed Wellington Guest, who had also come to the rescue.

Victoria shook her head. "No one can comfort me."

"Some one might try," he suggested. "Here, I say, Inchgarvie has been rather overdoing the part, keeping you to himself all the way down. We change here, you know; let me find you a carriage. I heard the porter say this was our train."

He helped Blanche and Victoria into the carriage as he spoke, and, following himself, slammed the door. He was so gay and careless, and Victoria was so quickly made happy, Blanche wondered how anything could really much matter to people like that. She herself would rather feel a few things if she were never to enjoy the others, in spite of the fact that the people who feel the most are commonly called upon to bear the most; she acknowledged the theory herself. It was, indeed, only another version of the rather heartless axiom, "The back is fitted to the burden."

Charlton Dammerel was a large white house standing

on high ground amid a forest of trees. The bare brown boughs were so closely twined together the landscape seemed clothed even in winter ; dark shadows lay low on the rustling trees, and large white stars shone in the windy sky. Mortimer and Blanche drove on a little in advance of the others, to be greeted in the inner hall by a stately housekeeper in stiff black silk. She was anxious to see her master alone, and seemed perturbed and needlessly upset by a very small mishap—tea would have to be served in the library, she explained, as the drawing-room fire had smoked and then gone out ; they had been obliged to light it again.

But Mortimer only laughed. "All right, Mrs. Laverton, don't you worry, the library will do quite as well, if you'll have the other room ready by night."

The old servant still looked perturbed ; she had the credit of the establishment very much at heart, and curtsied apologetically.

Blanche smiled. "What does smoke or anything else matter to-night ?" she felt inclined to say, and only checked herself in time. "I'm afraid I've scandalized Mrs. Laverton," she whispered as she followed Keppel ; "I was so unsympathetic about the smoke."

"The smoke ?" he echoed ; he was quite as excited as she, and much more preoccupied. "Never before has the place seemed so like home. Can you guess why it is so different to-day ?"

"You know how much I might have loved it," she answered, and the ring of regret in her voice touched him strangely.

"It was built for you, every stick and stone of the

old place ; just as I was made for you, body and soul, from the day I was born." He turned from her a little bitterly, and closed the door.

"It seems so strange to be in your house," she said, anxious to clear away the cloud.

"And yet it seems so natural to have you here! It's given me quite a turn, coming home together like this."

She came a step nearer and clung lightly to his arm. "I should have hung up your hat in the hall—I believe that's what you were expecting—and put your slippers to warm by the fire."

He looked down at her and smiled indulgently. "I always said you had none of the domestic virtues—and yet—how is it?—you could make a home in the wilderness."

"You make me nervous, dearest, and the house makes me jealous. I don't want any one to see it but me."

"Hang it all, why should they then? Let's lock 'em out. Don't you wish they weren't coming?"

He looked at her like a reckless boy, and held her hands more tightly in his ; and before he would release her he made her say she wished it too.

"But I thought you were so hospitable!" she added, as she straightened her hat.

"It isn't a question of hospitality to-night. I feel as if we were on our honeymoon, you and I, and that no one has any right to intrude," he answered, at which moment they both heard the sound of carriage wheels.

The library was a long, narrow room with a lofty ceiling, and a remarkable frieze of peacocks following

each other in procession all round the room. The book-cases lining the walls had a lattice-work of gold wire to protect the books, and the long windows were hung with rose-coloured curtains, on which more gorgeous peacocks trailed their tails. Blanche exclaimed less than any one else at the things in the house, but she saw more than any of the others. She had never taken such an interest in any house before, and grew quite nervous when she noticed a book she had lent Keppel some days before lying on one of the tables.

But Lord Inchgarvie had drawn his chair close up to the table where she was making tea.

"Have you told Mrs. Heythrop yet, Victoria?" he asked with ill-concealed triumph, as he looked across at his reluctant bride.

"There is no good telling Mrs. Heythrop, she knew long ago."

"Did you, Mrs. Heythrop? Did you guess Victoria would consent? We are engaged to be married now, did you know?"

But his shy pride had the worst effect on Victoria. "I wish you'd go and speak to some one else for a bit, Sandie, I want to sit by Mrs. Heythrop," she said.

Lord Inchgarvie's countenance fell; he moved away at once, however, and she flung herself down on the rose-coloured sofa and began to fidget with the tea-spoons on the tray.

"You're behaving very badly," Blanche remarked severely.

Victoria stopped fidgetting for a moment. "I don't know any better; I've always been cross when I feel

cross, and I feel cross now." She frowned sulkily, and went on playing with the teaspoons.

"It will be a pity if you get into the habit of frowning, it rather spoils your looks," Blanche answered in a reflective manner. "I wonder what it is you are frowning about?"

"About everything, of course. I hate having to change my mind and come round to all the things I said I wouldn't. I hate having to marry a man just because everything is suitable and convenient and nice; the whole thing might be a French marriage as far as any one has consulted me. People keep congratulating me and writing such footling letters, and I loathe the wedding-presents—lots of them I never even undo."

"You're the product of a pampered generation," said Blanche.

"It's a great pity to marry the wrong man," Victoria protested.

"It's a worse pity to make the fatal mistake of imagining after you are married that some one else is the right man."

Victoria pushed away the tea-tray; she did not like the tone of ridicule in Blanche's voice, hitherto she had spoken to her as one on an equality.

"I don't say but that after a bit I may get more accustomed to Sandie; women seem to get accustomed to all kinds of husbands. But no one can say I've jumped at him."

"It would be a wicked scandal if they did; to look before you leap is quite another thing." Then Blanche changed the subject, and spoke more thoughtfully still.

"Mortimer has been telling me a great deal about Inchgarvie Castle ; it must be a wonderful place. My dear, you will be able to entertain on a bigger scale than ever your mother has done."

The voice of the world appeals to the world in a way no trite maxim ever does, and Victoria began to think of the castle in Scotland, the palace in the Midlands, and the mansion in St. James' Square. She smiled rather shamefacedly to herself as she wondered if a tiara would be as becoming to her as it was to Angela Sunsutton, and whether any of her friends would have such generous settlements as she.

"Then you think, too, that the primal marriage blessing is gold ?" she said.

"Of course it's gold—what else could it jolly well be ?" exclaimed Wellington Guest, who had come up for another cup of tea.

Mortimer came into the room at the same moment with an open letter in his hand.

"Will this do, Blanche ? I wish you'd read it," he asked confidentially ; he liked to consult her on the very smallest thing he did.

Blanche dressed for dinner early ; she wanted to have time to look through some of the books in the library. Mortimer had a large collection, and had often told her about the different editions. Mortimer dressed early, too ; it was some time since he had entertained at Charlton, and he wished to make sure that everything was as it should be. He hoped to himself Blanche might also feel it her duty to come down soon, nor was his hope deferred.

housekeeper's hands. Blanche gently smoothed its ruffled plumage.

"The owl? Which owl? Where did it come from?"

"I wouldn't have had it happen not for a thousand pounds, but it's the owl what fell down the drawing-room chimbley and delayed us from lighting the fire. I went white as the lace on your dress, madam, when I saw the crittur, it give me such a turn; and I wouldn't have nobody know nothink about it if you please, least of all Mr. Mortimer."

"Why not Mr. Mortimer? Has the owl done so much damage?"

"It's not the damage I'm a-thinking on, it's the family superstition. An owl brings ill-luck to the Keppels of Charlton I've always heard tell, so I wouldn't say nothink about it to Mr. Mortimer, if you please."

Blanche promised; she assured the old housekeeper an owl falling down a chimney was merely an accident; but she wondered to herself where she had heard the same foolish superstition before, and left Mrs. Laverton only half convinced.

Mortimer Keppel was one of those men who never show to such advantage as in their own house; he made a charming host, so thoughtful and so considerate, that even Victoria began to be happy again. Hospitality was part of his creed, it was also part of his nature; but it was all stranger than the strangest dream, Blanche thought, as she took her place at the head of Keppel's table. She glanced once, involuntarily, down to the opposite end, and caught his eye as she did so.

"I shall look no more," she resolved mentally, for Mortimer should certainly have been looking at the Duchess of Sunsutton, who was lovely enough to satisfy the desire of most men's eyes.

Meantime Wellington Guest, who sat at her elbow, broke in on her thoughts. He wanted to know what she thought of the new waistcoat buttons all the smart folk were wearing?

Blanche looked round the table. "Don't tell Major Royle, but I think they are too ornate."

Wellington's face fell. "I'm sorry for that. I have just ordered a pearl and turquoise set myself; but it was as much to oblige the man as anything else. I'm so deeply in his debt as it is, I thought it was the least I could do."

"No one has asked after my father," Miles remarked in an aggrieved tone.

"It must be a touching sight to see Miles and his father together," some one suggested.

"It's touch and go, if you mean that!" cried Major Royle. "No one knows how long Miles's patience will hold out. I saw them together once at a railway station. 'Pon my soul, Mrs. Heythrop and I were quaking in our shoes. Miles is all right, you know, if you take him the right way; but his father's way was awful. He heaped insult on injury, and capped it all by turning to Mrs. Heythrop and saying, 'I always wonder, my dear Blanche'—excuse me, Mrs. Heythrop, but those were his words—'what could have induced you to marry that man?' 'I never wonder,' Mrs. Heythrop answered."

"And a jolly clever answer too," observed Miles, who had never enjoyed anything more than Blanche's ready retort and the old man's discomfiture.

"I always stick up for Eddy before his face, and nearly always behind his back," Mrs. Eddy Eaton remarked virtuously.

"Is there a ghost at Inchgarvie Castle?" Blanche asked rather hastily, anxious that the subject of Miles's father might be allowed to drop.

Lord Inchgarvie was much attached to his castle, and grew interested at once.

"There's the ghost of a queen who comes at night and cries and wrings her hands. I heard her myself when I was a kid the night before my father died."

"What is the queen crying for? Does any one know?" Blanche asked.

"She cries because the nobles refused to say grace till she bribed them with an extra glass of wine; but there was one old reprobate—the Inchgarvies were an odd lot in those days!—who wouldn't mend his manners, no matter how much wine they gave him; so then the ghost came. We have always had to say grace at the castle ever since, to make up for his sins; it's a sort of family rule. The queen's name was Margaret, she came from England, that's how she was so civilized, and in the end they made her a saint. She had a brother called Edgar Atherton, who was always trying to get other people's thrones; but I don't know what became of him."

Lord Inchgarvie's Scottish history was a bit sketchy; but Victoria was much too impressed to be critical.

"If you imagine I'm going to say grace, you're very much mistaken," she declared.

"Oh, I say, Victoria, but you must, you know. The old earl once dropped it, and a spate came on that night and flooded out half the crofters in the glen. You needn't say it in St. James's Square," he added eagerly.

Angela Sunsutton sat on Mortimer's right; she was like sunbeams blended with starlight that night, and dazzled every one who looked her way. Diamonds shone in her golden hair, a constellation of greater lights was set all round her white shoulders, her dress was made of the faintest, softest amber silk, and diamonds were clasped around her delicate wrists. The Sunsutton diamonds had become a family register, the Duke of Sunsutton's grim form of revenge, when the vagaries of his gorgeous wife tried him beyond endurance, being to seize the family jewels and send them off to the bank, from whence they could not be released till he wrote an order himself and signed it with the ducal signature. It was thus always possible to see at a glance what sort of terms Angela was on with her husband. But this summary mode of dealing with a refractory wife had frequently put poor Angela to the greatest inconvenience, obliging her on one memorable occasion to appear at a fancy-dress ball in the simple garb of the beggar maid, when she had intended bursting on the world as the Queen of Sheba. It had been the first real trial in her life, and had put her under the cruel necessity of imploring help from a bank manager, and approaching a stony-hearted director with tears in her exquisite eyes; but they were invulnerable, and the

shock was so great, her faith in man was almost shaken. Miles had met her in Pall Mall immediately after the interview; it was he who had helped her into her brougham and valiantly done his best to assuage her grief. "It's not so much for myself," she had sobbed; "but think of the poor Armenians!" Armenians were to have embroidered the Sheba robe—the miserable refugees were counting on the brilliant advertisement—and she scarcely knew whether she was most sorry for herself or them. But the tenderness of her heart roused all the dormant chivalry in Miles; he became a champion for the time, and entered his club with such a pugilistic expression on his face that some one asked him if he were going to fight a duel.

Angela was very conscious of her ornaments tonight, having been deprived of them after the telephone incident for a longer time than usual.

"Did you notice I was wearing my diamonds?" she asked Mortimer at last. She was so pleased she could think of nothing else.

"Is it the diamonds? I'm so completely dazzled, it's impossible to say what I've noticed."

"Of course it's the diamonds," she answered ingenuously. "They were given back because I was coming here. The moment Gustavus heard, he sent his man with an order to the bank. I wonder what makes him have such a good opinion of you, Mr. Keppel?"

"Can't say, I'm sure," Mortimer answered with a smile; "he knows I'm not a cracksmen perhaps."

But Major Royle had started a new game. "You take a pineapple," he began, "then every one puts up a

shilling ; that won't break any one. Then you all guess the number of leaves on the pine and write it down, and the one who has guessed nearest gets the sweepstake."

"But how can any one know the number of leaves on a pineapple ?" objected Mrs. Eddy Eaton.

While Angela begged in most pathetic tones that some one would help her ; she could never guess things unless she was helped. The puzzled pucker on her forehead was irresistible, and Miles did not miss the pretty opportunity.

"Where shall I get a pencil and paper ?" cried Major Royle. "Every one has to write down a number and then pass the paper on ; but no one is allowed to read what the others have written."

"You can judge the number of leaves to some extent by counting the number of tiers and then striking an average," Miles observed.

But Angela only shook her head ; it wasn't at all the sort of thing that would ever strike her. She was, besides, too intent on unfolding the little roll of paper, so that she might see what her neighbours had guessed, to pay much attention to his remarks.

"Angela's cheating, and our host is the only person who has paid up," said Major Royle, still fondling the pineapple.

The game proved rather a success, and Blanche for the second time looked down the table at Mortimer. She added a unit to his age, and passed the paper on to Welcome.

"We often do it on the Coast, but it makes your fingers horribly dirty," Major Royle explained ; he had

were white, and the great Persian carpet that covered the floor was old rose-pink to match the plates. It was such a pretty room, Blanche almost sighed; she looked across at the two low chairs set either side the wide hearth, and pressed her hand to her face with a sudden little gesture of pain.

"He doesn't seem to have any of our photos anywhere about; I am sure he has been given plenty," Victoria observed.

"No more he has," Angela answered. "I gave him a three-quarter length on vellum only the other day. Where does he keep them all, I wonder?"

She turned to Blanche, but Blanche was leaning on the mantelpiece with one foot on the low brass fender, fully absorbed in Mrs. Eddy Eaton's account of her daughter's engagement.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton felt as the sportsman feels who has shot a royal or landed a record salmon.

"You have heard our news, of course," she began. "I put it all down to the staircase at the Castle myself. You know how convenient it is for anything of the sort; they went further and further up, and when they got to the landing I really began to hope. Sandie has been an angel of consideration all through, though Victoria kept me in a fidget up to the last minute. I had to keep her and Beatrice separated at the end; one's children are so amazingly clever nowadays, there is no saying what they may not do if two of them conspire together. But Sandie was cleverer than I, and got round Beatrice somehow: he proved he knew more about shelties than she, or collie dogs, I forget which it was,

And Beatrice had to climb down ; she's very just, you know, and not near so unreasonable as Victoria ; and now that it's all fixed up, I feel a good ten years younger. Eddy says I'm a matchmaker, but if you are not to save your senseless children from their own blundering stupidity, wherever is the use of being a mother ? ”

“ He is so radiant, I must say I wish Victoria were a little more so.”

“ Oh, that will all come right of itself,” Mrs. Eddy hastened to assure her. “ I was just the same. I remember how furious I was when I couldn't marry the man I wanted to and found I must Eddy, and now I wouldn't change for any money. I heard only the other day he makes his wife keep accounts and reads all her letters ; interference like that would drive me silly. But Eddy is quite different, he knows nothing about arithmetic, and can't be bothered to read his own letters, let alone other people's. I want her to be married in Royal Italian Point—we've got two flounces, you know—but Eddy hates anything old at a wedding.”

Some one asked Major Royle to sing when the men came in from the dining-room.

“ You'd like the ‘Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,’ wouldn't you, Mrs. Heythrop ? ” he answered.

“ Is that the song you sang us at Saffery Lodge ? ” Keppel asked ; and he and Blanche looked immediately at each other when he began to play.

Mrs. Eddy Eaton played dummy bridge with Miles and Wellington.

“ Shall we draw for dummy or change seats ? ” one of them asked.

"Oh, draw ; changing seats always makes me feel exactly like the hatter and the March hare at the mad tea-party," she answered, as she threw down the cards in a long curve across the table.

Victoria, a little paler than usual, sat bolt upright on the edge of a stiff old-fashioned chair ; one of her slim white hands rested on the arm of the chair, the other lay on her lap ; her pretty, fair hair was piled high on her head, and she held her chin a little too much in the air. She was speaking to Lord Inchgarvie, or permitting him to speak of her ; but the seat he sat on was low, and she held her head so high, her eyelids drooped each time she looked down in his direction ; which tiny affectation so captivated Lord Inchgarvie, he could do nothing but look, and try to look away, and then furtively look again.

Blanche glanced at Mortimer once or twice ; the expression in his eyes was unfathomable and his thoughts so deep that he never noticed she was looking in his direction.

Presently, however, the duchess began to upbraid him about the dearth of photographs.

"I believe you throw them all away. How can you be so cruel ? "

There were lots in the smoking-room, he told her ; he always sat there when he was alone and liked to have them about.

"Do come and let me show them you. I've got the Duchess of Sunsutton framed in silver four inches deep."

He came back after a bit, but without the duchess. His eyes were unfathomable still, and making his way to Blanche he leant over the back of her chair.

"Angela has gone to bed," he explained.

Blanche asked if she was ill.

"She's not ill, but she's rather upset. She wanted to see my photos, but I forgot Charlie's was there, and when she saw him she broke down entirely. So I told her she had better go to bed, and promised to come and tell you. I said you would go and see her—do you mind? It would be very kind if you would."

It was, however, some time later before Blanche could go, Mrs. Eddy Eaton took so long to say good night. She began in the drawing-room; gradually drawing every one after her, she continued in the hall, to remember half-way up the stairs she had still a great deal more to say. She leant over the banisters to say it, while all the men stood in a semicircle down below, each of them vowing, when she left them at last, that neither of the daughters would ever be a patch on their mother. While she still held her audience the chance of his life came to the gallant Inchgarvie.

He was on the gallery, out of earshot, lighting Victoria's candle; she had said there were no matches, and had called him up. It was then her manner changed, so quickly that he almost lost his breath. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure they were alone, she came and stood beside him.

"Sandie," she said, "I'm sorry I've been so horrid; I'm going to be ever so much nicer after this."

Lord Inchgarvie just managed to keep his mental balance.

"Are you really?" he stammered. But there was more to be said, no matter at how great a cost. "I

want you to be happy—I shall think of nothing else; but I don't want you to marry me to oblige your people, and I don't want you to marry me under false pretences either. If we marry I don't want to lead separate lives or any of that sort of thing; I want to do everything together, and to have you always by me—it is my idea of bliss."

He looked at her anxiously, fearful he had said too much.

Victoria gave one little gasp and burst into a torrent of tears—it was her last refuge; but Lord Inchgarvie had no great knowledge of women. He took her in his arms, however—that was simple enough—and his heart almost burst with happiness as she told him, in snatches between her sobs, that he had been so good to her.

After which Lord Inchgarvie came down the stairs alone, looking like the head of every clan in Scotland. Blanche was still waiting on the stairs for Mrs. Eddy Eaton, and noticed the difference in his countenance as he passed them by. She watched him when he got down to the hall, and could not help smiling: in his bewilderment he was earnestly pressing the spout of a soda-water syphon, and as earnestly holding his tumbler under the handle! He had no more idea what he was doing than a man in his sleep, but the fondness of the rather foolish smile that was hovering round his mouth explained it all.

"I've gone to bed, you see. I always go to bed when I am unhappy; there's something so soothing

about pillows and an eiderdown," Angela said, as she lay back in luxurious comfort and looked at Blanche.

Angela Sunsutton never looked more lovely than when she was distressed. In her brilliant hours of triumph she was a being to be worshipped; in simpler moments of this sort she only wanted kindness and love. She was in distress to-night, and the fact of her being so seemed as sad as though a child, in impotent sorrow, were to cry itself to sleep in the dark. But the cloud on her brow etherealized her beauty, and only intensified the expressive nature of her face; her golden hair was looped up in soft loose curls, and her beautiful dark eyes looked as innocent as the world before the discovery of sin. She had been reading Charlie's battered Prayer-book; she still held it in her hand, continuing to turn over the pages all the time she was talking to Blanche; it had a sentimental value now far above rubies, and she would not have parted with it for all the Sunsutton jewels. Blanche had often envied Angela her radiant disposition: nothing that happened to her ever seemed to matter much; in any case she could always seek distraction, and with Angela to be distracted was instantly to forget. She always reminded Blanche of an inconsequent swift-winged humming-bird. Born without a care to live without a sorrow, her life had always seemed one butterfly dance of adulation, devotion, and fun. Gorgeously clad as the humming-bird, she had known as little as he of winter or rough weather. And Charlie had been just such another: the gods themselves might have envied the pair their felicity and friendship; nor could any

one blame them for enjoying the sunshine together. But to-night the pretty brainless duchess was in tears.

"It was the photo in Mr. Keppel's smoking-room—the photo of Charlie, I mean. I wanted to see the smoking-room, but when I saw my poor Charlie I turned quite faint. Mr. Keppel asked me if I was ill; so then I explained, and he wanted to put the photo away, but I wouldn't let him do that. It was in such a beautiful silver frame," she continued softly; "I believe Mr. Keppel is very fond of him, but he's one of those men who never speak—at least one of those men who never speak to me."

"There can't be many!" Blanche remarked, as she wheeled a low chair up to the fire and looked across at the duchess.

"I wonder if *he* has ever been in love?" responded Angela, still trying to solve Mortimer Keppel.

"I wonder!" echoed Blanche, gazing into the fire with the faintest, proudest, most fleeting smile about her lips.

"We are told to love our neighbours in church; they are always telling us to, and yet when we do it in real life every one calls it a scandal. How can loving be wrong? Surely it would be much worse if we didn't love any one?"

Blanche considered. "There can't be any harm in loving," she replied a little doubtfully.

"When Gustavus finds fault he always asks me to explain my conduct. He has no patience with conduct that can't be explained, and I never can explain mine; so then he gets angry, and, after all, he is my husband, and I promised two bishops and a sub-dean that I would obey him." Angela sighed, and turned over more

pages of the Prayer-book. "I can't see how you can help loving some people, though you can't explain what it is makes you love them. No one could have helped loving Charlie: he was always enjoying himself and having such fun; he never got dull or cross. He would have made a charming husband; I used often to think so. For some one else, of course," she added hastily. Then she frowned, and for a minute considered deeply. "Yet I wasn't in love with Charlie, was I? That would have certainly been wrong."

"What's the difference?" asked Blanche; she too was a little perplexed.

"Oh, all the difference in the world. You're not in love with all the people you love, are you?"

Blanche smiled; she was scarcely thinking of herself.

"When I talk I always think of myself, it makes it more interesting. Then it's not wrong to love, but it's wrong to be in love; and yet it's very wrong to marry unless you are in love. Blanche, it really is very confusing! Why weren't we made without hearts at all? It would be much easier to behave properly then, and, anyway, no one would ever have heart disease."

"We should lose a lot, though—all that makes life worth living."

"I should have thought there were lots of other things that made your life worth living," Angela replied.

Angela had the gift inherited from childhood of a perfectly honest stare. She stared now at Blanche, who had all the attraction a person of strong character usually has for one who needs constant support, speculating dimly on things her shallow brain could only

surmise. She could speak to Blanche, however, without apologizing or explaining or swearing her to secrecy—all which were strong attractions to a person of her headlong temperament. She wondered sometimes in a fitful way if Miles was the man who had taught Blanche all she knew; her reasoning was primitive, and she concluded all strong views any woman held must have been taught her by some man—unless, of course, there were people so constituted they could teach themselves—she herself had no conception of such a character. What she had not learnt from the duke she had learnt from Charlie, and what Charlie had not taught her she had learnt from others than he; there were always plenty who were willing to undertake the task.

"You always seem so sensible and calm," she continued, still gazing at Blanche, "and Miles and every one else depends on you so, and you always seem to like every one equally, and not to mind when they go away or don't sit next you, or any of the things I mind so much."

Blanche smiled again; Angela was so very apt. "I have minded them all."

"Really to mind?"

"I shouldn't have felt them unless I had really minded."

"One must mind, and one can't forget if it's the real thing; and surely no one could want me to forget Charlie, it would be so unkind, and I can't forget him anyway. You ought to love the neighbours God has given you, I know you ought."

"In one way, of course we ought."

"Well, then, who's to decide which way? And why

should you give up all the fun because other people have evil minds ? Charlie had the nicest mind of any man I ever knew ; so high and simple, you could say anything before him and it did not matter. He never saw much joke in horrid sort of things unless they were very clever, and then he saw the joke less than ever. And every man liked him at once, you could always be sure of that ; and yet I don't know how they knew he was so nice, for Charlie never showed himself off. But they adored him in the regiment, and he was just as fond of them, without ever seeing what a tremendous favourite he was himself. I am very foolish, I know, but I pray sometimes that it may all be a huge mistake, and that he isn't really dead. It seems too sad to be true, and I can't help praying, even if my prayers are too silly to be heard."

Angela Sunsutton wept.

" I have his Prayer-book ; it was in his hand when he died. I take it with me always, and I couldn't sleep now without it is under my pillow. There can be no harm in that ? " she asked gently.

" How could there be ? " Blanche answered ; but the colour rushed to her face—Angela was so candid, and so fearless in her candour ; some of her words cut like a knife.

But she was not to be so easily absolved. " I think there must have been some harm. There must be a very distinct rule about loving, else people wouldn't be so spiteful when you break it ; and when you don't keep rules you must be breaking them, and I am quite as bad as other people."

But Blanche interrupted her. " Indeed you're not," she insisted.

Angela was a good deal interested. "I keep most of the Commandments, if that is what you mean, but then they are so easy. I never steal—why should I? my own things are much nicer than other people's; and I never covet my neighbours, I am always pitying them too much for having to be cooks or dressmakers or just ordinary people leading deadly dull lives; and I couldn't bear to murder anything, not even a fly, because of the horrid crunchy noise"—she shuddered fastidiously, but continued her ruthless self-examination. "I don't keep Sunday, because even Gustavus never attempts to do that; and I always teach the children they mustn't do things because they will only make him furious, that's 'honouring' you know; and I have never"—she hesitated—"committed anything," she concluded with some little ambiguity.

"I never supposed you had!" Blanche answered.

"There's no harm in me, I suppose that's what you mean to say; it's what people who know me well always say; it's about the most generous thing you can say of any one who is talked of a lot. I sometimes wonder what they mean by *harm*. At least, of course, I know well enough what they do mean; but there are other kinds of harm than that, and if I haven't got the proper kind I've got the others."

"Most people would call it the *improper*," Blanche suggested, as she stirred the fire into a blaze.

But the duchess was studying her Prayer-book again.

"I hope I'm not in love with Charlie, for that would be mean to Gustavus, and I'm not mean, I'm sure I'm not. All the same, it's only fair to say, if I was a

widow, and if poor Charlie wasn't dead—or if I had met him first before I met Gustavus, that would have been better still—we should have married each other, I know we should, and there must be harm in knowing a thing like that." There was silence for a minute. "Charlie could never have been a duke, never, never," she murmured to herself, in a meditative way.

"What do you mean, my dear? Charlie would have been a duke if he had been born a duke."

"The sort like Charlie are never born dukes. No duke in this kingdom could ever have been like Charlie. Have you never noticed that the men it would be most foolish *not* to marry, are never half so nice as the men one would be a fool to marry? Position and riches are so charming they blind one to everything, without the man is a bounder, of course; but it's the men who are not the dukes who break your heart." She sighed, and kissed the Prayer-book softly.

"I was never in love with a duke," Blanche observed.

"Neither was I," responded the heedless duchess. "Dear me, what am I saying?" she exclaimed, with a little scream. "I married one, in any case."

"And loved him, I'm sure," Blanche added hastily.

"I loved him in a way, but I loved everything about him as much; I don't really know which I loved most." Then she stared at Blanche. "Have you ever met a woman who refused a duke?" she asked.

Blanche admitted that she never had.

"Nor more have I; it wasn't likely that I would break the record. You see, I am saying everything bang out without making you promise not to tell.

They say it's a mistake to be confidential, because one is sure to say too much ; but when you meet some one you can trust, I can't see why you shouldn't say what you please ; and I know I can trust you, because you have heard so many things already and are accustomed to keeping them to yourself."

Blanche asked how she knew this.

" You are never surprised or the least inquisitive ; people who have never heard much are always trying to find things out. Every one confides in you, even Mr. Keppel ; he would never read his letters to any one else."

" He only read it over to see how it sounded—there was nothing in that."

" I dare say there was nothing in it, there never is in business letters ; but no one ever reads letters to me. Charlie couldn't write any more than I can, and his spelling was far worse. Do you think I've said too much ? " she asked a little plaintively. " I haven't tried to be discreet, because I've got a headache, and I've never any sense when I'm tired. I'm never discreet at the best of times, it's one of the things Gustavus complains of ; I only give myself away, however, never other people ; but he only says, ' Think of your reputation.' But I never think about anything so dull ; it's not worth much if one has always to be taking care of it, and I told Gustavus so."

" I don't know why people never speak about love, " she continued, after Blanche had assured her she had not said too much ; " they speak about everything else, down to their most internal illnesses, which are not nearly so nice, and only make you think you've got them all yourself."

" Very few people understand love, " Blanche

answered slowly; she leant back in her chair and gazed into the fire while she listened to the duchess. "They like excitement and adulation and vanity, and every one envying them, but that's not love."

"I'm like that, I'm rather afraid—at least I'm vain," Angela confessed.

"You understand all the same," Blanche said briefly.

"Perhaps some people's hearts are bigger than others," she suggested as a new way out of the difficulty. "If your hands are larger, you can strike so many more notes than an octave; so when your heart is bigger, you probably love people so much the more."

"It's more individual than physical. Some people have much deeper feelings, and everything that happens to them is a wonder."

"It's no one's fault, then; I should like to think neither Charlie nor I was to blame. I like to be sure he has gone to heaven; he would be so dreadfully disappointed if they turned him back." Then she stopped suddenly. "Oh, Blanche, do tell me what Charlie is doing in heaven? How is it possible to think of him there?"

Blanche comforted her with soothing words; if Charlie was there he must surely be content.

Angela shook her head. "You don't know Charlie! How could it be heaven to him without guns and horses and battles? and could it be heaven with any of those things?" She lowered her voice and spoke very softly. "Do you know where this Prayer-book always opens if I let it open of itself? At the Epistle for St. Michael and All Angels, 'There was war in heaven,' that is how it begins. Charlie was a born

soldier, you could see it in his eyes, and he was so brave. He must have gone quite mad when he was under fire, and I don't wonder; if I were in a battle I should cry all the time, war music is so stirring."

"He lived too late," Blanche said; "he should have been in the Charge of the Light Brigade;" she could imagine the dauntless Charlie quite at home in that terrible scene.

Angela had grown equally grave. "He cheered, you know, Charlie did, after he was hit, Mr. Keppel heard him. Then he fell back and all his men rushed forward, cheering is so infectious, and they were cheering too. The surgeon who saw him afterwards could not understand how he had breath to cheer, he was hit so cruelly. Mr. Keppel couldn't understand it either. He said Charlie died in a kind of ecstasy of battle. It was probably the happiest moment of his life, he said. How I wish I had been there! I used to wish it day and night at first. I should not have minded the Boers one bit, or the guns and horses and screams, if only I could have been there to hold my poor Charlie when he died. I could have made him more comfortable, and whispered to him all the time. I should have known just what to say, and Charlie would have been so glad.

"Because Charlie was young and good-looking and in the Guards, why was no one to love him? Rules are so absurd: you may love the poor if you like, and orphans, and the unemployed, yet you mustn't love an orphan in the Guards—how is that? Surely men in the Guards are nearer neighbours than the unemployed? Anyway, one has much more in common with them.

"If Charlie had been married we couldn't have been friends in the same way, it wouldn't have been fair to his wife, and he wouldn't have needed me. But I taught him a lot, and I often thought how grateful she would be to me one day.

"We did everything together, that is how I taught him, and he knew my tastes so well; I could have trusted him to buy me a hat or engage a new nursery-maid. It makes a man nicer to know a little about these things, so long as he doesn't know them by instinct—I hate that sort! And I was just as proud of his shooting and riding, and of him being so wonderfully athletic and strong; he never bucked himself, but other men have told me how splendid he was."

Blanche followed Angela's conversation with a good deal of sympathy; the analogy between herself and the duchess was strong; their trains of thought might be different, but it was the same spirit, exactly the same.

"When people see harm where there is no harm, they never see any good—they only see what they expect to see. But it requires two to make a friendship like yours, Angela, and all men are not so nice as Charlie."

Angela's logic was straightforward as a child's. "Then one would not choose them for one's intimate friends, that is simple enough," she answered, with wide-open eyes.

"Perhaps it is scarcely fair to the man; one ought to think of him," Blanche said; she was thinking deeply of Keppel.

"One generally thinks too much of the man! I don't think half enough myself, I forget them so soon—

all but Charlie. If they're out of sight they're out of my mind ; I know it's most ungrateful. That's why I have their photos all over the house, to try to make myself a little less forgetful."

It was rather hard to argue with Angela: every one knew the hard-and-fast rules of life, yet Blanche found it none the less easy to insist on them.

"Blanche, I wish you would tell me again that there was no harm. I kissed him, you know, there's no good denying that, once or twice—not much more than four times, only when it was necessary."

"Necessity must have very often been the mother of invention, if you consulted Charlie, that is to say!"

"I never consulted Charlie about a thing of that sort, it wouldn't have been fair. I suppose that was wrong, the three first times, I mean, not the fourth, any one might kiss a man who was going to the war, and lots of women did ;" she was anxious to justify herself when she could.

And Blanche agreed a little hurriedly, "Lots!"

"I shouldn't like to think there was anything vulgar about our friendship."

"Vulgar ?" echoed Blanche.

"I call it very vulgar the way a lot of men and women behave. Kissing is vulgar too, unless you're careful."

Blanche smiled. "I'm sure it is," she agreed. The text about wisdom coming ofttimes out of the mouth of babes, kept running in her head all the time.

"It comes to this, Blanche—ought one to suppress every emotion ?"

"One ought to if they are wrong."

"But if they're not, and you know they're not, and if Charlie's weren't wrong either? Do you mean that people think a man and a woman can't be friends, devoted friends, and remain only friends?"

"Many people seem to think so."

"Then I know for certain they're wrong."

"So do I!" agreed Blanche. She herself had no wish to brand human nature with so hot an iron.

"Charlie was different," Angela repeated; it was the gist of her whole argument.

Mortimer was certainly different too, vastly different; perhaps they were exceptions and should have exceptional rules.

"I am sure Charlie was different," she agreed.

"And it does make a difference, doesn't it? Why shouldn't I do what I choose?"

"I can't see why you shouldn't, but I wouldn't say so to every one; not to a girl like Victoria, for instance, who doesn't know herself yet or any one else."

"Lots of people have been shocked with me, I know; lots of our neighbours round Sutton, good sort of women and old gossiping men, who go to church and bring up children and never do anything wrong, but such dowds, and oh, so plain! I sometimes wonder who made them our judges—what can they know about fun and enjoyment? They seem to think everything is wrong except garden parties; but I don't believe any one has ever begged and prayed and beseeched to be allowed to kiss their hair."

She pulled one of her own golden locks right down over her eyes and pondered.

"They do it at their own peril, and that proves nothing. Because one man can walk on a tight-rope without falling, you wouldn't say it was safe or advisable for other people to leave off walking on the road."

Angela frowned again. "I thought we should all try and keep to the narrow road—I suppose that's what you mean by the tight-rope?"

Blanche gave up her metaphor in despair. "I only mean it's silly to ignore rules because there happen to be a few exceptions; they only prove the strength of the rule."

"I'm glad I'm one of the exceptions, then. But Gustavus would never understand that sort of argument!"

"The general public never do. It ends often in innocent people declaring they may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."

"I don't understand that at all!" exclaimed the duchess. But Blanche thought it wiser to leave her in doubt. "I suppose you mean, it is quite possible to outrage society and yet remain perfectly respectable?"

"There are many simpler ways of being respectable," Blanche answered.

"It's too late to tell me of them now. Whatever I may mean to do in the future, I'm certain I've outraged people in the past. I've got a great many nice homes, and one of the greatest dukes in England, and I love my children dearly; I can't help feeling all the same that the most beautiful part of my life will always be my love for Charlie, and when I think of his handsome face and the sort of gleam he always had in his eyes, I only want to kneel down and say my prayers over and over again. Can you understand that, Blanche?"

"My dear, of course I can!" Blanche answered, with such fervour that Angela opened wide her beautiful eyes.

"I wish I knew a little more about you, Blanche. I wish I could love like you. But I've never met that kind of man, and I wouldn't appeal to him if I did. People never confide in me because they think me a sieve, but I never repeat, it is so mean, and I wish you'd tell me just a little to-night. You must love some one, it is so easy for a woman to love a man."

"Not all men!"

"I never mean all men when I'm only thinking of Charlie. But that proves it; no one would say 'not all men,' unless they were thinking of one."

"There's so little to tell, and so little object in telling it, and I don't want to ruin either his life or my own, you can understand that. But I have felt so nervous about it sometimes, I must have seemed quite hard and cold."

"Perhaps he understood too."

"Perhaps he did, but lots of men wouldn't. No one knows how difficult it has been."

"He wouldn't have liked you so well if you weren't that sort," said Angela, who was not without her moments of inspiration. "But he must be a man in a thousand. So few men ever like a woman for her character, especially a woman as good-looking as you."

"You might search through thousands upon thousands, but never find any one at all the same."

Angela pulled her loose curls down over her forehead, and raised her delicate eyebrows until they disappeared.

"I believe I know!" she exclaimed suddenly, and she lifted herself on her elbow.

Among all the men she knew there was one man who stood on a plane of his own ; not because she liked him less, but because she would most gladly have liked him more. No one was ever so friendly, or half so thoughtful and kind, but no one was ever so hopelessly aloof. He was the most aloof man in England—she sometimes thought, the only one.

“Good Heavens !” she cried, “ how have you kept your head ? ”

Blanche had the fearless sincerity that always accompanies pride ; she refrained from any banal remark of inquiry or denial.

“ It only makes me all the more sure that a friendship between a man and a woman—in ordinary cases—must be impossible.”

“ Not with him,” said Angela ; there were some things she could not imagine.

“ Ours is not an ordinary friendship,” Blanche replied gently, and the light in her eyes made her for the moment more lovely than the exquisite Angela.

Angela looked at her and sighed. “ It must be rather like being in love with your husband, quite as respectable, I mean. The only danger would be in getting to trust him too much. Are people ever as happy as you might have been ? It would make me idolatrous, I know it would.”

“ It makes me very careful about judging other people —I know how easy it would be for them to misjudge me.”

“ There's not one of them fit to judge you, not one,” cried the duchess, with all the contempt of the aristocrat who but seldom insists on his privileges. “ You know

that if Gustavus or any other duke or peer committed a crime, they wouldn't be tried by an ordinary court or ordinary lawyers, they would be tried by all the other peers—not because they know anything about law, but because they understand peers; it's called, one law for the rich and another for the poor. Well, then, why shouldn't they have one law for the good and another for the bad?"

The idea of being tried by her peers struck Blanche as no specious one; so much was intelligible when much was understood. But Angela's sermon on loving-kindness had unbalanced her a little, and wishing to think it all over by her own bedroom fire, she looked at the clock.

"My dear, it's past twelve! I must fly. Shall I put out the light?" she cried, as she sprang up and pushed away her chair.

But Angela took no interest in practical details. "The light?" she echoed absently. "What light? I am so glad it is him, Blanche, and that it is you. I could not bear to think either of you were mixed up in a common intrigue."

"Good night," said Blanche. "I hope your head is not aching?"

"There's something aching!" Angela answered; and she turned her face on the pillow and shut her eyes tightly to prevent herself weeping.

"Good night," said Blanche again, more gently still; and when she stooped to kiss her cheek, she found it was wet with tears.

In the gallery the lamps were still alight, but Blanche was just in time; Mortimer and Major Royle at that

moment were putting out the lamp on the stairs. They both turned as she came hurrying along, and Mortimer's grave face grew eager in a moment.

"I've been all this time with Angela; I had no idea it was so late," she explained a little breathlessly.

"You might have let us come and sit with you. What were you and Angela talking about?" asked Major Royle.

"What were you and Mr. Keppel?" Blanche asked, pausing for a moment.

"Better not ask! Royle's private conversation can never be repeated."

"Never!" echoed Major Royle, fervently.

"Worse than Miles?" she asked.

"Worse than Miles ever lets you hear, I'll be bound," he answered, struggling meantime to put out the lamp at the top of the stairs. "Here, I say, Keppel, why should I do all the dirty work? I've been putting out lamps for the last half-hour, Mrs. Heythrop, and my hands are saturated with paraffin oil."

"You've put out one too many now! How is Mrs. Heythrop to see the way to her room?" Mortimer demanded; the end of the gallery had been suddenly plunged into total darkness.

The major quickly offered to go and fetch one of his own bedroom candles; but though he apologized, he was not altogether sorry for the mistake. To put out a lamp so far above his head was no mean feat for a man of his inches, and he was glad neither of them had noticed what a strain it had been.

It was certainly much later than Blanche had supposed; she wished she had not sat with Angela quite

so long, and she wished Major Royle would be a little quicker with the candle.

"He must be making it," she declared, rather nervously, as she peered along the dark corridor.

"Looking for his matches, most probably," Mortimer responded.

There was really no need to hurry, his tone implied, and but faintly interested in the delay, he too peered into the darkness.

"Where's Miles?" Blanche asked.

She did not want the conversation to languish; but it was a silly thing to say, and she was angry with herself the moment she had said it. Once before at an overwrought moment in her life she had made the same primitive remark, and she knew in a flash that Mortimer remembered. The house was so still and silent, and Major Royle would not come. At such a time and place the subject was the last one she wished to recall.

Keppel remembered right enough—the memory was too fond a one for him to forget, even if Blanche had not spoken in the same voice, and looked over her shoulder in exactly the same way, she had done in the shed at Southampton before the African War. The darkness was around them, and nothing between but the empty corridor.

Angela's words of dazzled appreciation had wakened Blanche out of all her wonted reserve; Mortimer had not yet shaken off the blissful delusion of being on his honeymoon. If she could have clung to him for a single moment; if he could have held her in his arms! One deep called to another deep. "Oh, my God!" cried Blanche, under her breath. The expression Keppel

SATURDAY

Charlton Dammerel.

BLANCHE woke with the hope of the morning upon her; she could sleep no more. With a sudden rush of self-pity she thought of other blanker to-morrows, but her heart was too light for anything to actually blight the fact of to-day. She threw the window more widely open, to be greeted as she did so by a buoyant breath of spring; winter was held in abeyance, and the wind from the south was as soft as silk. The tree-tops of the Forest stretched for miles around; it had been raining early, and though the trees were bare every twig in the great endless network glittered with the recent shower; some russet leaves in one of the rides shone like gold, the hollies were the colour of sapphires, soft blue and purple shadows covered all the other naked boughs. Far away on the horizon the coast-line rose in an outline of amethyst and grey, with one bar of dazzling light where the land dropped. It was the wings of the morning dancing in the uttermost parts of the sea.

Even while she lingered Blanche noticed two gardeners at work in a corner of the garden down below. They were digging a hole in the moist brown earth behind the yew hedge, and must be going to plant something, she

supposed—till she saw they were burying a great grey owl. She had forgotten about the owl and shivered a little. What was it Mortimer had told her once about grey owls, or was it Dorking hens? She really could not remember; and forgot the matter entirely as she met Mortimer in the hall.

There were point-to-point races to be held that morning, to which all the party were going, and Mortimer's graceful figure in hunting kit made Blanche's eyes positively dance.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You!” she replied, and all the charm that could be put into so brief an answer, she put.

Mortimer drew himself up; the man Blanche Heythrop chose to admire might well hold up his head.

“Good morning,” cried Victoria, in her clear, high-pitched voice. “Mother is not half ready; you had best send up her breakfast, else she is sure to be late, and I don't want to miss any of the races.” She herself was determined to lose no time, and taking her place at the breakfast-table, began asking for ham. “And please cut it thick, Mr. Keppel, I am so hungry,” she said; while Lord Inchgarvie hovered round with a mustard-pot and a plate of rolls.

“How I hate letters that begin ‘my dear’! I can't see why people don't put ‘dearest,’ ” Angela remarked, as she opened the little pile of letters that lay by her plate.

“Ah!” exclaimed Miles, “I shall know how to begin my next letter!”

“I wasn't complaining about *you*, ” she answered sweetly; “but some people are so *gauche*.”

"I always begin my letters 'darling,' business letters and all—it looks so much more friendly," Major Royle remarked.

He had more correspondence than any one else, and was so full of importance he could scarcely contain himself.

"The long envelopes are from the War Office, this is from the Colonial. Would you like to read them, Mrs. Heythrop? They're not really very private."

"How could you give up your regiment? I would much rather be a soldier than a commissioner," Angela exclaimed.

He was to be District Commissioner; it made a bit of difference, he told her.

But Angela only shook her head. "Nothing would induce me to go to the West Coast—nothing in the world. They're all cannibals out there, and you can never be sure what you're eating. Lots of men have told me so."

Miles began explaining laboriously; he would rather quarrel with Angela any day than receive smiles from another.

"I take it the great thing out there is to build roads," Keppel said.

And Major Royle promptly began to expound his views on opening up the interior. His head-quarters would be Warri, he explained, and he should devote all his spare energy to the cultivation of cotton.

"There'll be a slump in cotton soon," Miles observed, rather disagreeably; it seemed unkind to damp the enthusiastic major.

"How any one can sleep in cotton sheets when they can have linen, I can't imagine!" Angela added.

"Why any one should travel third class when there is such a thing as the Pullman, beats me!" Keppel replied.

But Angela never knew when she was beaten, or never acknowledged it if she did.

"They do it to save money, I expect," she informed him gravely, surprised a man of the world should have such a small knowledge of life.

At which moment Blanche remembered the date was the twenty-second, and the twenty-second was Lord Heythrop's birthday.

"Miles, it's the twenty-second, and you've sent nothing to your father! Don't you want to wish him many happy returns?"

"It's the last thing I really wish, but I don't suppose it will make any difference whether I say so or no—what!"

"Best be careful," Wellington advised; "prayers are sometimes answered."

"I wouldn't be Miles's father for anything," Angela said; she was in a contentious mood that morning.

"His wife must have quite as lively a time," Wellington added, "she has to keep the peace."

"I thought she would have to keep the pieces last time they met. Miles was spoiling for a fight, and the noble lord was ready enough to give him a lead," joined in Major Royle.

"I'm always so glad Gustavus never had a father."

"Look out, my dear lady—you'll raise the ghosts

of Debrett and Burke if you're not more discreet," Wellington cried.

"I mean," Angela continued calmly, "I'm so glad I never had a father-in-law—I'm not the sort of person in-laws would like."

"You go down well enough with other people!" a manly voice protested.

"I've been going downhill all my life; they say you wake up with a jerk when you get to the bottom, like falling down cliffs in a dream, you know," Wellington said.

Blanche asked sympathetically, if it would be long before he woke up?

"Do I look as if I were riding for a fall?" he asked. "I'm thinking of taking to drink, Mrs. Heythrop, or else of getting married—one or other is the end of most men's careers."

"You don't mean a word you say!" Blanche declared.

"Clever people never do!" he answered.

"There's Eddy!" exclaimed Victoria, at the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel; and they all went into the hall.

By rising betimes and leaving town at six o'clock, Eddy Eaton had been able to join the party. He was cold and hungry now but full of pride in his achievement.

"I thought of coming by the mail," he said, "but three o'clock is such an unconscionable hour to arrive."

"How is our august friend?" Mortimer asked.

While Major Royle made a military salute, and began to whistle, half under his breath, the opening bars of "God save the King."

"Never had such a pleasant evening in my life," Eddy replied, as he slipped off his overcoat.

But news of the day, even at first hand, could not hold Mortimer that morning.

"Have some breakfast, old thing. I've had it all kept hot. Ring for all you want and don't hurry. You'll excuse me, I know. I've some business that must be seen to at once," he explained, as he left his guest and sprang upstairs three steps at a time.

"Blanche," he cried, as he caught her up, "would you like some violets? We don't start for a bit, and there are some in a frame at the foot of the garden."

He had calculated like a miser on these few minutes of grace before the horses came round.

The violets sweetly scented all the still sunny air, and the high yew hedge completely blocked out the house from sight. Blanche sat down on the edge of the frame.

"What were you and Angela speaking about last night?" Keppel asked, as he groped among the violet leaves.

"Loving-kindness—Angela is full of it. I can't tell you how eloquent she was."

"I thought women always spoke about illnesses and servants when they weren't running down their husbands?"

"When you are so odious, I always wonder how it is I like you at all."

"You couldn't help yourself. You would if you could, I know well enough."

"I regret nothing."

"Having nothing to regret!"

“Naturally!” she answered dryly.

“Every morn I bring thee violets,” he murmured.

“Don’t give yourself such Puritanical airs!”

But Blanche would not be drawn.

“I always wanted you to see Charlton. A nice old place, isn’t it?”

“Beautiful,” she answered; then she paused significantly, and Mortimer straightened himself.

“Don’t begin telling me to start a foundry, or found a family. I don’t know what you call it.”

“You’ll really have to one day.”

He sighed. “I’d do a lot for the place, but I wouldn’t marry unless I could do my duty by the woman.”

“You could never do anything else. It’s not in you to be a bad husband; you couldn’t if you tried. Try it, anyway; I tell you we should all settle down much more naturally than you think.”

“It could never be natural to me to like any woman but you.”

“Only at the beginning—it would become second nature after a bit; and you’re so proud, the mere fact of her being *your* wife would soon make you think the world of her.”

“People often say to me, what a clever woman Mrs. Heythrop is; the next time they make the remark I shall say, ‘Give me a fool!’”

“I hope you won’t marry one, then; no one ever had so little patience with fools as you. I have often pretended I knew things because I knew how irritated you would be if you had to explain.”

somewhere, he forgot exactly where, when a fellow came barging up against him and called him "Gubbins"—that was the pith of the whole story. "Hello, Gubbins, it's ages since we met," the insolent creature cried. "To be called Gubbins, you know," Wellington Cumberland Guest kept repeating. "I told him my name was not Gubbins, and that we had never met before."

Miles was almost more delighted than any one else with the story. "Welcome, by Jove—called after every field-marshal in England—Gubbins!" it really was most excellent fun.

Angela confided to Blanche that she would rather be called Gubbins than Sandie.

"Do you know what they call Inchgarvie in Scotland?" whispered Major Royle, who had overheard. "They call him the Garvie Herring!"

"Is it a red herring?" she whispered back.

Once or twice that morning Wellington had looked at Blanche, and then hesitated and turned away; but when the brake drew up on the open ground at the edge of the Forest and the horses were taken out, he came up again and asked her if she would come for a little walk, so that he might show her part of the course.

Blanche never quite understood Wellington; he rather reminded her of the man who was described as having so many pleasant social vices. At other times she was inclined to think most of his wickedness was merely a pose to hide a good deal of genuine kindness of heart. She asked him what he was going to back?

"I'm stoney, I'm not going to take up a single bet.

I tell you, Mrs. Heythrop, without joking, I have to count the words in my wires nowadays."

"How are you going to economize?"

"I'm thinking of marrying," he replied.

"For money?"

He shook his head. "For t'other thing more likely."

Wellington Guest never looked at the person he was talking to till the end of his sentence, when he gave him or her one sweeping glance and looked away again.

"You don't believe a word I am saying, I suppose?"

"Not a word," she answered, laughing.

"Seriously, Mrs. Heythrop, what is a poor devil to do who is in love and in debt at the same time, and wants to play the game all round?"

"I should advise him to keep out of the way. To expect a girl to be true to two men at once is expecting a little too much."

"I don't want her to be true to either of the other two, but I should like her to be true to me."

"Good Heavens, Welcome, what do you mean? I'm speaking about Victoria."

"But I'm not!" he answered, raking her face with another keen glance. "I'm not quite the double-dyed villain you take me for! Victoria led me a giddy dance at one time, but it was only a dance; she did it to bring Inchgarvie to the scratch, I suppose. Not that he wanted much bringing, but all the Eatons like variety."

Blanche thought Victoria, at least, had been a little more deeply involved, and wondered again if Welcome meant what he said. Whether or no, his point of view was certainly the wisest.

"I'm very glad they're fixed up," she said.

"So am I, never was so glad about anything in my life. Give her her head and she'll keep it; but come the authoritative over her and she loses it at once, none of the family can stand control. Trust these Scotchmen though—they're a canny lot; no doubt but Inchgarvie has a way of his own!" He glanced at her again. "Have you ever heard, that if the blind lead the blind they both fall into the ditch?"

"It says so in the Bible."

He sighed. "You write to Sybil Eaton sometimes, don't you? She told me you did."

"*She* told you?" Blanche echoed, more than ever amazed.

"I went over to Ireland to see her last week."

"Oh, why?" exclaimed Blanche. "It will only make people speak all the more."

"I went over to make them stop speaking—in all humility, such was my idea. I went over to ask her if she would marry me."

Blanche stared at him, but could read neither sanity nor insanity in his usual rapid glance.

"Some one ought to marry her," he continued, "she's had an awful rough time. The husband has divorced her, and now the man who dragged her into the divorce has left her in the lurch. She's got everything she richly deserves and a good deal more besides."

"No one is more aware of it than she herself."

"I know that," he answered impatiently. "The whole thing is monstrous, and I should have apologized for mentioning it at all. But marry a fool with the face

of an angel to a beast with the mind of a beast, and add a lying scoundrel who leaves an ignorant child to face the music alone, and you have the whole pretty situation."

"I had no idea you knew so much about it."

"It's difficult not to know things about the people you are fond of."

"You must have an uncommonly kind heart," Blanche stammered. Wellington had never interested her so much before.

"Tut, tut! It's not kindness at all," he declared; but his voice shook a little. "I wanted to ask you if I was taking an unfair advantage? I'm so afraid she'll feel herself bound to have me now. She's in very great trouble. Do you know the *whole* story?" he added, with a searching glance.

"I know it all," said Blanche. Mortimer had just told her.

"Keppel knows her brother, that's how it is. The brother would help me, I know; but I would rather have Sybil choose for herself. You'll think it's a case of setting a thief to catch a thief—what? But I can look after her at least. God knows she has need of it!"

"I can't say what I really think—I can't indeed," she told him.

And Wellington hastily murmured, "Thank you, thank you; please don't try. You're the only one who hasn't cast her off—the only one. I don't blame the others, not one bit; but I could kiss the ground you trod on. Forgive me if I speak like a fool, but you can't think how she hung on your letters."

"I should suffer fools gladly if they were all your sort," she said. "But tell me some more; I never knew you were fond of Sybil."

"I've always been fond of her. I went to her wedding and ground my teeth all through the service. After that I kept away, only to give place to a man a good deal worse than myself! But I understood my own weakness, and hers, too well; any attempt at polite friendship with us would have been impossible; she's no strength of character, I have less, and we have neither of us any sense." He shook his head. "It's very few who can indulge in that sort of game."

"Very few," agreed Blanche. It was a perilous game at the best of times.

"I am glad I can go to her with all my sins on my head; a better man had been forced to think twice, but I have nothing to lose."

"Perhaps you won't lose it," she suggested.

"Oh yes, we shall; it takes close on fifteen years to live down a scandal. And, mind you, I say nothing against it being so. I may be no better than I should be; but a woman can't be too good."

Blanche murmured something about circumstances making a difference.

"I think so, and so may you; but nothing can ever alter the fact. I've called her all the hard names I could, and said as much as I had the heart to say. I would so much rather fling the stones myself than allow any one else to fling them."

"You might have known——" Blanche interrupted, a little reproachfully.

He assured her he did know; of course he knew. How could he have spoken a word to her else?

"I shall write to her at once. I couldn't see what would happen, or what one could possibly propose. I never thought of this."

"Don't laugh at me, Mrs. Heythrop. I know well enough they will all say I'm a rum 'un to try and put things right. There's no other woman would marry me, is there now? I shouldn't have the face to ask her; and yet poor Sybil will be a fool if she thinks twice. I'm in debt, you know, I've got nothing to offer. I've always been in debt when I wanted to get married; it has always stumped me hitherto."

"It's different now."

"It is a bit; but it's none the less hard for Sybil. We want to lay low, however, and, by Jove, we shall have to! We'll get a little place at Errislannan, at the head of Solway Bay. There's lots of sport there—shooting and fishing; I shall sit in a duck punt all day, and I've sent all my hunters to Tattersall's. I mean to sell up everything I've got, except a fowling-piece and my top hat. I'll keep the top hat to let people know I'm a gentleman. We can't spend much money that way, and I shall have a little; there was always a bit of capital I couldn't touch." Then he looked at Blanche. "I know everything you've done, Mrs. Heythrop; you have been so kind. How generous of you to spare so much!"

Blanche blushed uncomfortably. "Don't thank me. Half of it was from Miles; but he doesn't want her to know."

She was a good deal touched by Welcome's behaviour—Bayard or Galahad could scarcely have done more. There was, besides, something almost pathetic in his idea of domestic life, he was willing to be happy with such shreds.

"I deserve so little," he said.

"What will the world do without you?" she asked.

Wellington was rather pleased. "Oh, it will jog on all right! I've often wished I could settle down, and I'm just the sort of man for this sort of job."

Wellington's disjointed manner of describing rather an unusual act of chivalry had at first been a little difficult to follow. Blanche had grasped it fully at last.

"But what will *you* do without the world?" she asked.

He smiled a little ruefully. "I shall turn into a pillar of salt if you say much more. Isn't that what happens to the people who look back? Seriously, Mrs. Heythrop, fellows have written to me from the colonies, grousing at life, and only longing to be able to hail a hansom again and drive down to the club. They stop writing when they get married, but they don't mind the banishment any more."

"I understand," Blanche said. It was nevertheless the last lesson she had ever expected to learn from Wellington. Then she asked him about Sybil. "Has she agreed? What did she say?"

"Said she didn't want to wreck my life. 'You can't do that, dear child,' I said; 'my life was wrecked too long ago.'"

"It's impossible to understand you, and still more impossible to imagine you a married man."

"Sybil deserves a better fate, you think? I know it's a miserable poor life to offer any woman, and I'm so afraid she'll feel herself bound to accept. What is the alternative, you know!"

"That wasn't what I meant at all. It's a much better fate than poor Sybil deserves."

"Don't say that," he said gently. "I don't want you to know us or anything like that; but write to the outcasts in the wilderness sometimes, and remember Sybil in your prayers."

Blanche was very anxious to express some of the admiration she was feeling; but Wellington only said, "Tut, tut!" and told her it was time they turned back.

"Do you remember Sybil saying once she loved the world too much to sacrifice herself to either the flesh or the devil? She's sacrificed herself to both," said Blanche. (Sybil's husband had been a conspicuously ponderous man, there could only be one name for the other.)

"And the world she loved was not so black as he was painted! Is that what you mean?" Wellington asked, with a graceful bow.

"The eyes of the world will be the first to realize that," she answered.

Miles was reading out items of interest from the *Morning Post* to Mrs. Eddy and Angela, who were still in the brake, when Blanche returned.

"I never read the papers, except the Births, Deaths, and Marriages, and the column that says where every one is," Mrs. Eddy Eaton observed.

"I can't stand newspapers, they're so dull; but I always read the Births," Angela remarked virtuously, "and anything interesting about myself."

"And do you read that in the Births?" Miles suggested.

Angela was somewhat annoyed. Miles wanted to put her out of countenance she knew.

"I was speaking of the Fashionable Intelligence column," she answered icily.

"But a birth is fashionable intelligence right enough, especially in your case," he persisted.

She raised her patrician chin and looked down the ridge of her delicate nose.

"When I had a son it wasn't fashionable intelligence at all—it was a historical event."

Her withering glance failed, however, to annihilate Miles.

"So sorry, your grace, but I never knew before you were a woman with a history!" he replied.

And Angela was so pleased at having got the better of Miles, she never noticed that he had had the last word after all.

Then Keppel came riding up on his favourite hunter, and Blanche and Mrs. Eddy, who had taken no part in the newspaper controversy, leant over to speak to him.

"Wish me good luck," he said; "we are just going to start."

"You both look as fit as a fiddle," said Miles; "you're certain to be in the first flight."

"I thought white feet weren't lucky," said Mrs. Eddy Eaton, looking critically at his mount.

But Keppel flicked the coat of his peerless steed, and said it was only a groom's superstition.

"I want to see the finish," Blanche said.

Miles promised to take her, and while he was pointing out the goal to the others, Mortimer came close up to the side of the brake so that she could stroke the hunter's satin neck.

"You don't treat me so gently as that," he murmured, as he stooped down.

"How unfair you are! I've been nicer to you than I ever ought to be."

"Why don't you keep to the rules then? How nice *ought* you to be?"

"Not half so nice as I should like to be, and you never make it any easier."

She went on stroking the horse's neck and would not raise her head.

"Look at me, dear," he said a little impatiently.

She looked at last, and her heart was in her eyes.

"What's your horse's name?" Angela asked, by way of turning the cold shoulder on Miles, with whom she had just done disputing.

She might know nothing of the different points the race was to cover, but that was no reason why she should not argue the matter out, and for Miles to prevent her getting the best of the argument, only showed how pig-headed all men were.

"I call him 'Creditor,' because he's a dun," Mortimer answered.

But Angela failed to see the subtle joke, and the slight smile that had played about Mortimer's mouth politely faded away.

"Are you lucky about chancey things, Mr. Keppel? Luck has so much to do with racing?"

"He never has any luck in a gamble, I don't know how it is," said Miles.

"Unsuccessful in gaming, successful in love. I shall probably be whipper-in, but what's the odds, I shall have had my run!"

Mrs. Eddy was much diverted by Mortimer's random remarks.

"I believe you're going to be married at last! Are you engaged?" she asked.

"I shouldn't say I was exactly engaged!" Mortimer answered slowly.

"I shouldn't listen to a word he says; he's only trying to be interesting," Blanche declared.

"He's either laughing at every one, or else he's being very clever, or perhaps he's merely in love, which is it?"

Mortimer raised his eyebrows. "It were hard to say," he answered. With which cryptic remark he waved his hand and rode off, casting one long grave look at Blanche.

She tucked the violets more firmly into her fur coat, and stood up to watch him ride away. "Have you got any glasses, Miles?" she asked; and he gave her his at once, and said he could easily share with Angela.

"It's colder now the sun's gone," Mrs. Eddy Eaton said, as she wrapped an ermine stole more closely round her shoulders.

All the glitter of the morning had faded, the sky had clouded over, and the day was grown pale and grey. But Blanche scarcely noticed it; she was longing for Keppel to win, and hung on Miles for information. Miles was following the race with excitement equal to her own.

"He's got such a light hand, you know, and no man ever had a prettier seat. Look out, Angela, I can see nothing but your hat."

"I hope that silly-looking owl in the green coat won't win," Mrs. Eddy exclaimed.

While Angela shut her eyes. "I can't look; oh, Miles, I really can't!" she cried.

"All right," he answered soothingly. "You can hold my hand if you like. None of them will overhaul him now."

"Will he win, do you mean?" Blanche asked breathlessly.

She would be a little kinder than usual to Keppel when he came back, a little more friendly and glad—there could be no harm in that. He would look so handsome and gay, she knew; he would make so light of it all, and turn to her first of all, only caring to hear what it was she had to say. The colour came in her face with a little wave of heat, and her eyes dilated with eagerness. Every one was breathless and excited, it was nothing that she should be so too.

One of the most pathetic things is the happiness of people immediately before disaster.

At the last obstacle Mortimer was two lengths in front with his race well won, when suddenly, swiftly, apparently without any warning, Creditor came a dreadful smash, and turning a complete somersault, appeared to fall with his whole weight on his rider. The man in the green coat swerved to the right just in time, and in a moment a small crowd had gathered.

Blanche seized her husband's arm, she could not speak one word; but Angela hid her face in her hands and burst into terrified sobs.

"Who is it?" cried Mrs. Eddy Eaton. The crowd had gathered so fast that they were none of them quite sure. "Oh, Miles, do be quick!" But before she had time to speak, Miles had left them and was racing across the field.

"I think it was the man in the green coat; I'm sure it was," she declared. "Don't cry so, Angela, unless you really must. For mercy's sake wait till we are sure."

But Angela wept on, clinging blindly to Blanche's arm. Blanche had no idea that any one was touching her; she seemed turned to stone. The intentness with which she was watching for Miles had numbed her to every other sensation.

It was not many moments before Miles had reached the little crowd on the racecourse. They made way for him at once, and some one began to speak, but he could not hear what he said; the sight that met his eyes had turned him sick with horror.

Stunned by the shock, he waited till the doctor, who had been on the ground, had made what investigations he could.

"Is there any hope?" he asked, in a voice no one could have recognized as his own.

"We can do nothing; he is past all our aid now," the doctor said. "But his mind is clear; it wasn't his head. Some one should speak to him and tell him, I think. Is your wife here? A woman knows best what to say."

Miles went forward and bent down over Keppel with a gentleness he scarcely knew was in him.

"My dear, dear fellow," he stammered, "would you like to see Blanche?"

She was the one person he would ask for if he were dying; she seemed to him the only person now who could be of any avail, and Mortimer thought the same.

A moment, a month, a year might have passed, so it seemed to Blanche, before Miles came back to them. The race is not always to the swift—and she knew there was no hope the moment he emerged from the crowd, but she went to meet him; she could not wait.

"He wants you," Miles said, breaking off abruptly. He could say no more.

For one merciful moment Blanche turned so dizzy she could not hear; but Miles had begun to speak again, and the heaving ground grew firm beneath her feet.

"He knows it's all up, but he has one or two things to say. I promised you would come; I couldn't, Blanche—I really couldn't stand and watch Keppel die—not so suddenly as this. So he asked me to leave you alone with him. It won't be long, and he would rather speak to you. You won't faint, will you?" he asked, a little

anxiously. "I shall be close by ; but the doctor said one at a time was as much as he could stand."

Blanche told him she would not faint ; she was sure of that. She remembered as she spoke the horrid superstition about the owl, and some of Mortimer's own words returned to her like a flash.

" You wouldn't whine, and you wouldn't cry as other women do, and yet it would be a thousand times worse." It was a thousand, thousand times worse !

Mortimer Keppel lay on the ground, dying like a king, without a murmur or a moan. Blanche went and knelt on the grass close beside him—it was just the gay, gallant death she knew he would die.

His voice was broken and low, so that no one but she could hear what he said ; she heard every word.

" Are you there, Blanche ? " He was so pleased to see her, his voice was like a caress. " Not such a glorious death as Charlie's ! But you wouldn't have been beside me out there."

Miles still lingered a moment. " Is he so fond of you, Blanche ? Or does he take you for some one else ? I can't stand this ; it's too fearful. You must do something ; can't you kiss him, Blanche ? Thank God it can't last long."

Miles was completely overwhelmed by the tragedy ; the look of unspeakable anguish in Blanche's face unnerved him still more. Perhaps he should not have brought her, but Mortimer was their greatest friend ; she was as fond of him as he was—perhaps fonder !—it struck him suddenly, and he wondered he had never thought of it before. A friendship betwixt Blanche and

Mortimer could have been no lukewarm affair ; Mortimer had always been devoted to her ; how could it have been otherwise ? And Blanche—why, now that he thought of it, Mortimer was as much her ideal as though she had founded her ideal on Mortimer ! She was so fastidious, he had often laughed at the little things that put her off a man ; even so, nothing could put her off Keppel. They understood each other in finer ways than he had ever known ; it was too delicate and too subtly kind for him to altogether grasp. But he was not jealous, not in the ordinary way ; his faith was far too sure. Poor Blanche ! His feelings were stirred to the depth, and he looked at her as he used to look in that short delirious space of time when they were first married, and when his fleeting fancy was staple—at least, for the time. Poor Blanche ! She looked so sorrowful and pale, the beseeching look in her eyes would haunt him for ever, and he wished he could take her in his arms then and there as he used to do. It was a long time since he had done it now ! But Mortimer was dying, and, in the world of great men, Mortimer was the greatest man he had ever known. Poor Blanche indeed !

She heard afterwards Mortimer Keppel lived for forty-five minutes after he was thrown, so that she must have knelt beside him for less than that short space of time ; she could remember nothing herself, and took no count of the moments. That he was going to leave her and everything else in life he held so dear was too crushing for her to face ; heart and soul could not bear such a bitter strain. It had come so suddenly, without mercy or warning ; the meaning was very hard to seek. Did it

always happen to those who were dearest? Would it not have happened if she had not loved him so?

"Oh, Mortimer, my darling, my darling, it can't be true! You wouldn't be so cruel!"

"Have they told you, dear? Rough, isn't it, to part so soon? We always counted on Friday night till Monday morning for a week-end, and could never bear to miss an hour." Then he sighed. "The pace was a little too good to last, I'm afraid; but they've rung down the curtain far too soon."

"No one ever loved you as I do," she murmured. "Other people don't know what it means; your own mother, who adored you, never even guessed."

He told her she had been all the world to him, and the other broken words he whispered made her blush with pride. Then he smiled, but he seemed to be tired to death.

"Will they ever forgive me? Angela and Mrs. Eddy, I mean. If I had only known I would never have asked them down."

Some wattle hurdles had been roughly piled together to make a little shelter, and a tuft of furze that had been pulled up at the same time helped to form a sort of screen. Miles kept at a little distance, and the doctor and one or two others remained within call; but the Heythrops had always been Mortimer's closest friends, and the rest of the crowd drew sympathetically away. Mortimer knew he was dying, they explained to each other, glad of anything normal to discuss; but Miles was afraid of breaking down, he couldn't bear the idea of listening to his last words, and had begged Blanche to

~~Go~~ instead—a plucky woman Mrs. Heythrop—an awful trial for her !

But Angela neither spoke nor listened to their remarks ; she had shrunk into a corner of the brake, and still sobbed fitfully, with her face buried in her muff. Her soft heart bled for Blanche and Mortimer. But Blanche was there by his side ; that was something, and would always be a comfort to remember—Charlie had died all alone. The old wound broke out again at the remembrance of Charlie, and her tears fell fast. She was glad she knew—knew about Blanche and Mortimer ; mice had helped lions before this, and no one could help Blanche but she. The others pitied her much as they pitied themselves—they none of them could afford to lose so very good a friend ; Angela alone realized what the tragedy meant. Blanche would not speak ; it was not her way. If her heart broke she would let it break in silence ; even so, it would ease her pain a little to feel that Angela understood. She would speak to her gently about Mortimer—what a grand manner he had, and what a distinguished face ; how sad to die before his hair was grey ! Blanche would listen, she would be sure to listen ; and then at last she might cry ; it would be simpler and more natural then. But Charlie had died all alone ! She couldn't bear the thought, not without some human sympathy. " If only Miles was here, I could hold his hand," she said in the forlorn voice of a lost child.

A thousand swords leapt from their scabbards ! All that was man in every man present responded to the appeal. But Welcome was sitting next her, dejected

and sad, and she slipped her hand confidingly into his.

No one even smiled. In a moment of such tension ordinary forms were as nought; they had all of them become for the time almost as primitive as she.

Blanche had forgotten them all. Every tie and association of her former life was swept from her brain, the voice of the world sounded in her ears as though it were miles and miles away, and when some one brought a pillow to put under Mortimer's head, she started painfully.

The movement made him tighten his grasp. "Blanche," he whispered, "I am dying—a miserable sinner—too late now—does it matter? You will kiss me when I die?"

She kissed him again and again, softly and passionately, and held his hand as though she could never let it go.

"I am here, my darling. How could it matter now? Your sins are as white as snow."

"Have they covered me up? Does it frighten you, dearest? I can't help dreaming the old dream. Blanche, I wish you'd say it again."

She knew what he meant at once, and bent lower still.

"You may never come back," she repeated softly.

"I've done with it all now—what! But I want to die with your lips on mine. I'm game for a bit yet, but I'll tell you when the time comes. Promise me, Blanche."

"I am close beside you; I shall not go away. Can you feel my hand? Oh, my darling, my darling, are you in pain?"

He looked at her and smiled; but his lips were tightly drawn, and his smile was weary.

"It's easier to die than I thought, but it's queer, Blanche; I can't see anything but you."

"We're the only people in the world just now, and you are my very own," she answered, as she pressed her face to his.

Blanche, who was so proud, had become abject in her devotion.

"Promise you won't forget me. I could stand a good deal, but I couldn't stand being forgotten by you."

"Forget you, beloved? I shall think of you every day till I die. Forget you? How could I forget?"

"I'm not bucking, darling, but can you live without me? You know what I mean." His voice was growing feebler, and the painful catch in his breath nearly broke her heart.

"I can't think of any future, but I could never have lived at all if I hadn't known you. You will always be the dearest part of my life."

"But have I made things harder for you? Don't tell me I have done that."

"Everything in life will be bearable now. I shall never mind anything again, dear."

"I'm glad it's Miles—I'm very glad it's Miles," she heard him murmur. She thought of it afterwards, but at the time she scarcely understood.

"I always wanted to die in the open, Blanche, and I never could abide a funeral; mind you tell them so. I want the station waggon and the old white horse; any one will show you the way to the churchyard."

So long as he spoke about Blanche he was clear as ever, but directly he tried to grasp any other subject, his mind began to wander at once.

Blanche was terribly distressed. "Everything just as you wish, but not just yet. Mortimer, Mortimer, wait a little longer, else you'll break my heart."

He scarcely knew her in this mood of abnegation. "Do you remember how angry I used to be because you would not let yourself go?" he whispered. "I didn't like to tempt you then; your heart was much too soft and kind, and I knew you were afraid." He paused. "I can tempt you now; it doesn't matter any more." He paused again. "And no dream come true was ever half so sweet."

She held him closer still. "Now you know," she answered. "I wanted you to know."

She let out all her pent-up feelings at last in a passion of love and endearment, calling him every tender name she could think of, and hanging over him closer still in most pathetic devotion. Everything she had ever wanted to say she said now; every feeling she had ever suppressed blossomed now like the rose. She revealed herself fearlessly, down to the innermost depth of her soul.

It put new life into Mortimer, and for some minutes the ebbing tide ran strong in his veins once more.

"Why, what a woman you are, Blanche! Is this what you have been keeping from me all this time? It is stronger than death, love like yours and mine."

But her heart told her a sorrier tale, and she only went on stroking his brow and calling to him gently again and again. A bird suddenly bereft of its young cried in just the same way; it sounded familiar to Mortimer, and puzzled him dimly, till he remembered a boy, long ago in another life, with a capful of fledglings, being pursued all through the wood by a similar note of despair.

The light in his eyes burnt with all the glow of a dying fire.

"You will make a man of me yet, dearest, if you go on speaking in that voice. I shall cheat the doctor, after all, so that I may hear all you have to say."

He was man enough still to know what it meant coming from Blanche; her caressing accents fell on his ears like music.

"My love, how I shall make you blush when I recover! You don't suppose one of your precious words is lost upon me! I could never have stopped loving you, Blanche, not if I had tried for a lifetime, and married a score of wives, and gone to another hemisphere—one word from you in that voice, and all my mad devotion would have come back, stronger ten thousand times than before."

She could not speak, but her lightest touch was balm to Mortimer.

"It seems so odd to think we are on earth, you and I, and that soon I shall be elsewhere. How can it be

a better world, if you are no longer kneeling by my side? Can't I come back and feel your kisses once more?"

"Heaven is not so far from earth as people think," she told him, wondering at herself, "and the people who taste bliss here know what it is they can look forward to. You'll speak to me still, I shall often and often seem to hear your voice—you have always been so divinely kind—I shall have no one to care for me now!" She thought of his protecting, all-faithful love; whether he had been near or far, it had made a blessed thing of her life. His love was never failing, and had often reminded her of the Scotch song, "O wert thou in the cauld blast, I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee"—he could never do enough, and there was nothing he would not have done. "No one will care for me now, never again in your way," she repeated.

The cry came from her very heart, for only those who have been greatly cherished know what it is to lose so great a love.

Mortimer complained but once, and then it was more an apology than a murmur.

"I am dying so fast, darlin', do go on speaking. Tell it me all again and again. I shall think I am dead if I don't hear your voice."

She called softly to Miles; she would not move from her position, Keppel lay so much more easily when he lay in her arms.

"Is there anything—anything to keep him from sinking?" she beseeched him with pale, miserable eyes.

Miles shook his head. He came and knelt at

Mortimer's other side ; but the weight was nothing, she said ; she would not hear of Mortimer being moved.

Miles turned away again, and went back to his restless pacing to and fro, and to and fro. Blanche was more fit for the task than he.

She whispered to Mortimer again ; he heard her and smiled at once.

“ Where's all your pride, dear heart ? You've given yourself away right and left ! ” he said, in the old bantering way that she loved so well.

But his voice was huskier now, and the pain in her heart was intolerable.

“ Darling—are you there ? Only you, Blanche—I don't want any one else.”

“ No one else, dearest, only me. Can't you hear my voice ? ”

There was a longer pause ; it seemed to hurt him to breathe, and he did not hold her hand so close. Then he looked up at her with a face of such amazing gladness that she thought he was well again, and all the agony a dream.

“ You always promised—if I was dying ! Time's up, darling—kiss me—quick.”

But her lips were on his face before ever he had done speaking.

“ Again—again,” she heard him murmur ; they were his last words.

Something had happened, what, she could not comprehend, and she still knelt on.

“ Good-bye, good-bye,” she called after him, hoping,

in a dull way, her voice would bridge the sudden gulf, for his hand was still warm in her own. Every one died, of course, the happiest and the brightest; they were only there with that one end in view—but not so quickly, while life was still so strong—no one had ever died so cruelly before. She stooped down to kiss him once more, and as she did so, the violets he had given her in the unconscious sunshine of the morning, fell from her coat in a shower. She did not pick them up, but arranged them gently where they fell. Then she smoothed his dark hair with a touch a mother might have envied, and spread her handkerchief proudly over his face; no other eyes but hers should see the tenderness of his farewell smile. One word is too often profaned, but neither she nor Mortimer had ever profaned it.

“Good Lord! Blanche, I never saw a man die like that. What could have made him look so glad?” Miles gasped in an awed sort of way, as he helped her to gather up the fallen flowers.

Blanche turned a perfectly still, perfectly colourless, face towards her husband, whose own face was all wet with tears. It would be a long time before she broke down and cried; but she had never cared for him so much in her life as then, when he stood beside her with his careless eyes full of tears for Mortimer Keppel, and she remembered it long afterwards.

“If it had been any one but Mortimer!” he continued; and the blank misery in his voice sounded in her ears like an echo of that very old lament, “Oh, Absalom—my son, my son.” Some people one loved and

lost and in time forgot, others now and then were different—nothing ever made up, and no one again could ever be half so dear. There were still no tears in her eyes, but the pain in her heart would be there for ever, and the simplest words seemed to express it best.

“If it had been any one but Mortimer!”

She held out her hand—Mortimer had said he was glad it was Miles, if at such a moment she could be said to be glad of anything, she was glad it was Miles too.

“Take me away with you, Miles,” she said; and another gentle flutter of violets fell to the ground.

Death is the most irrevocable thing in the world, but it is not the saddest—not quite.

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